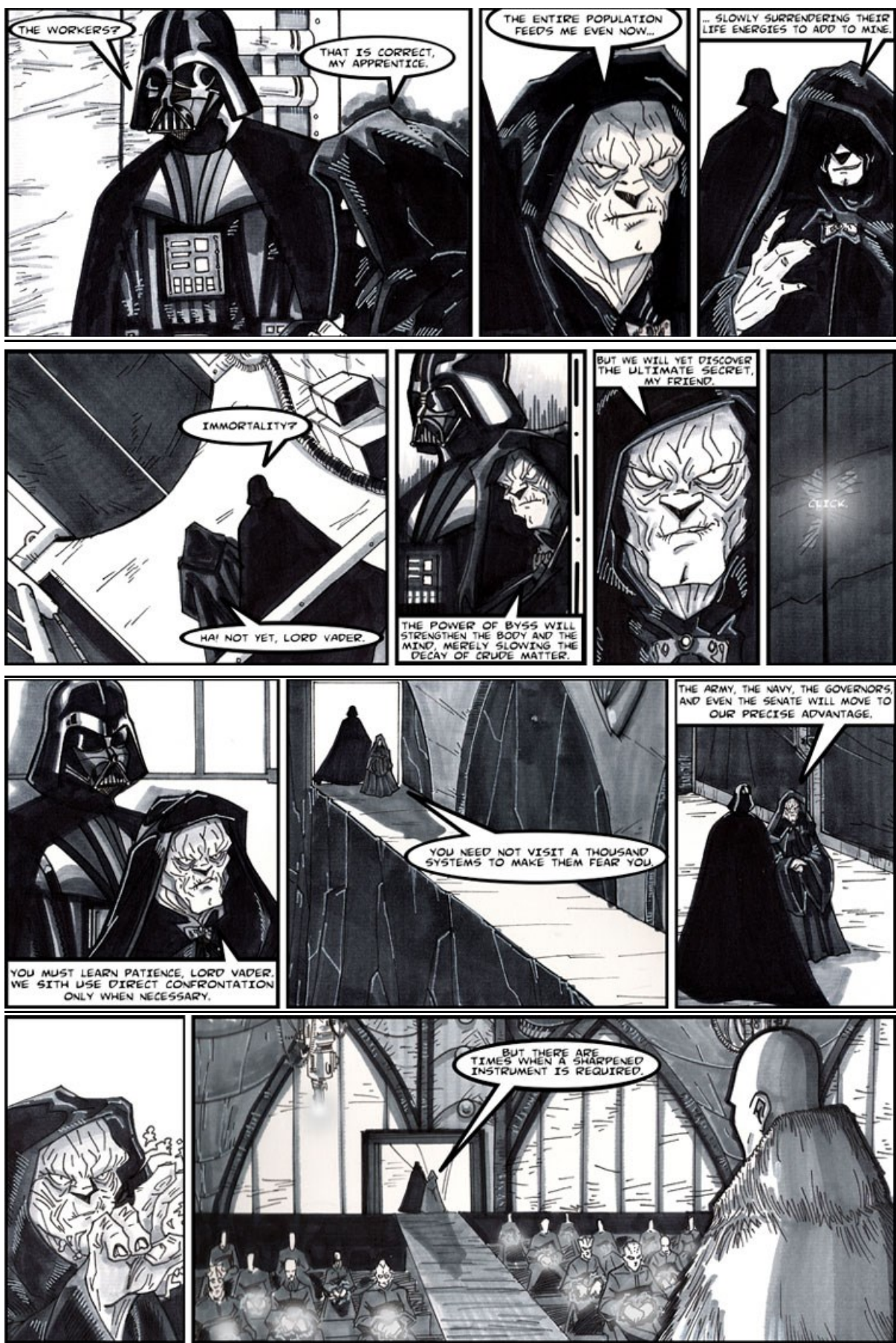


Evasive Action: Recruitment





















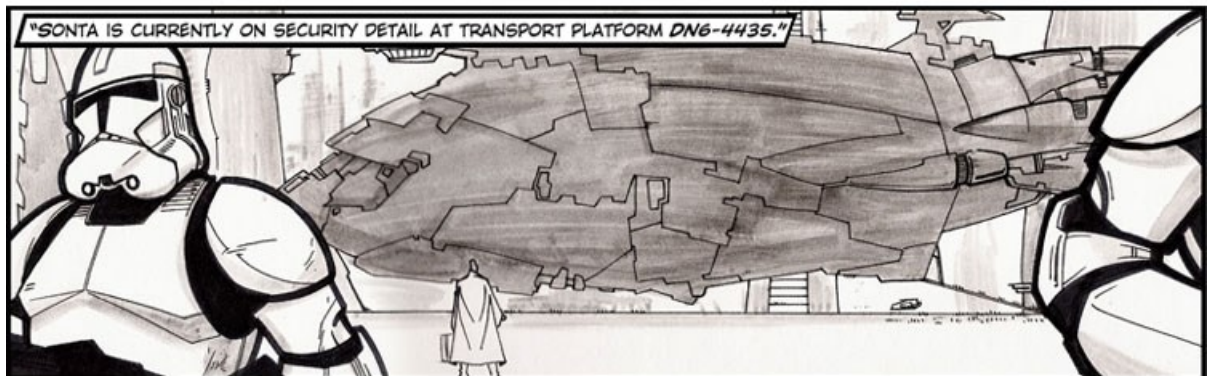
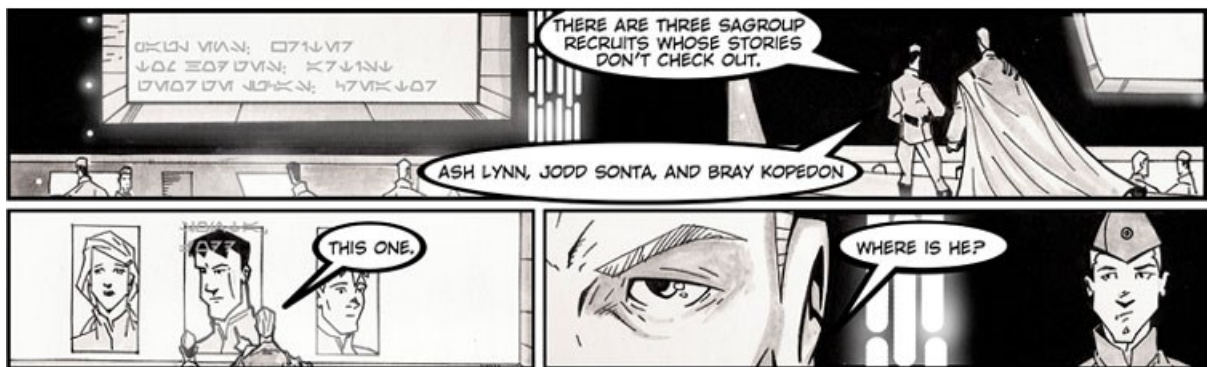




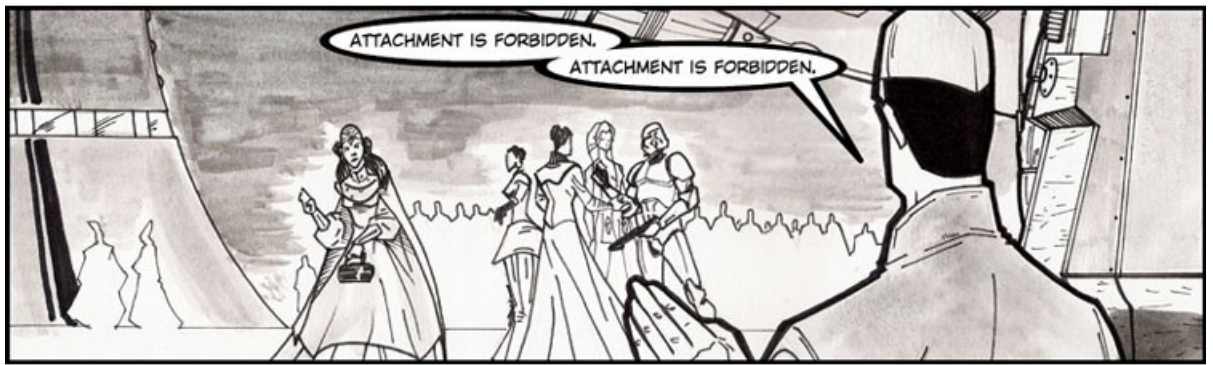


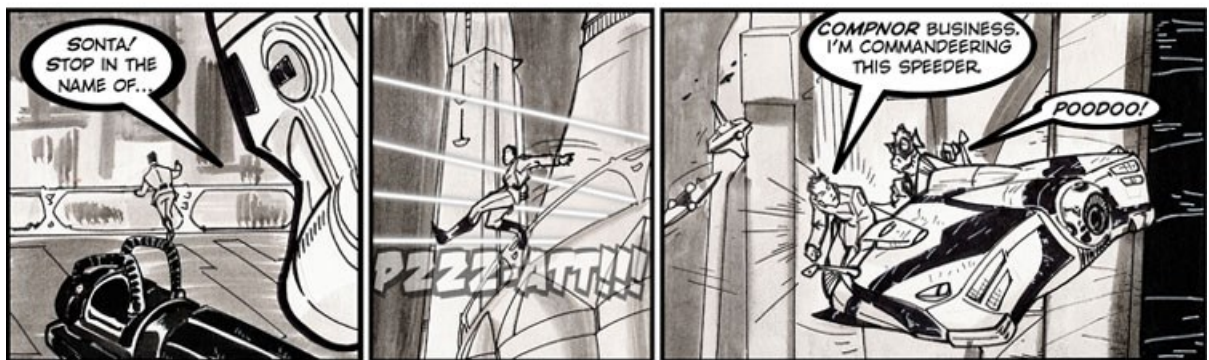




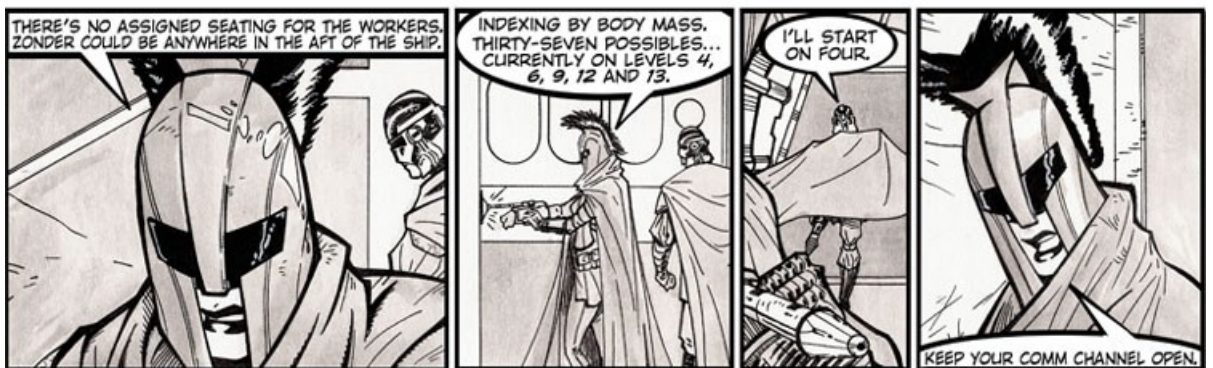
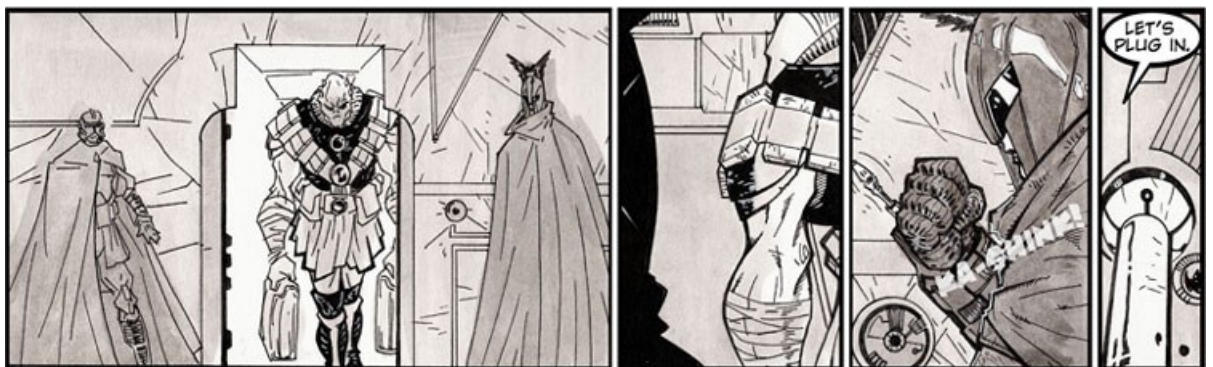


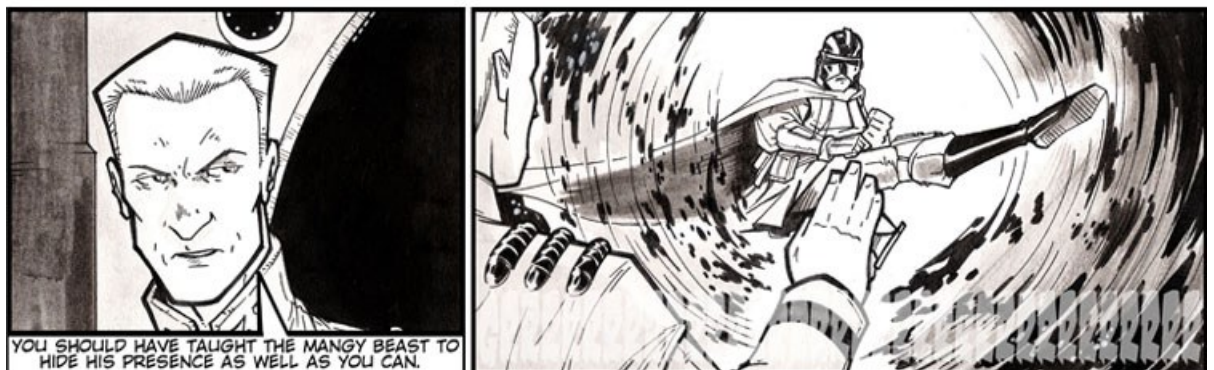
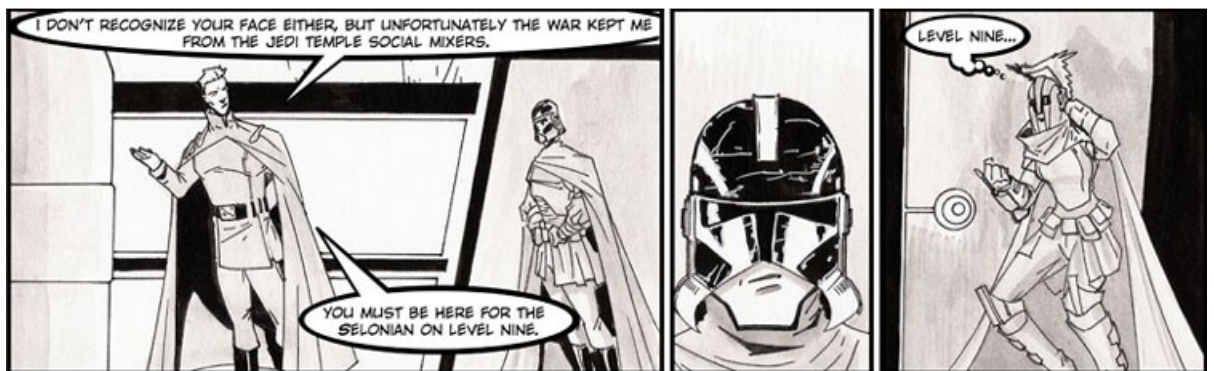
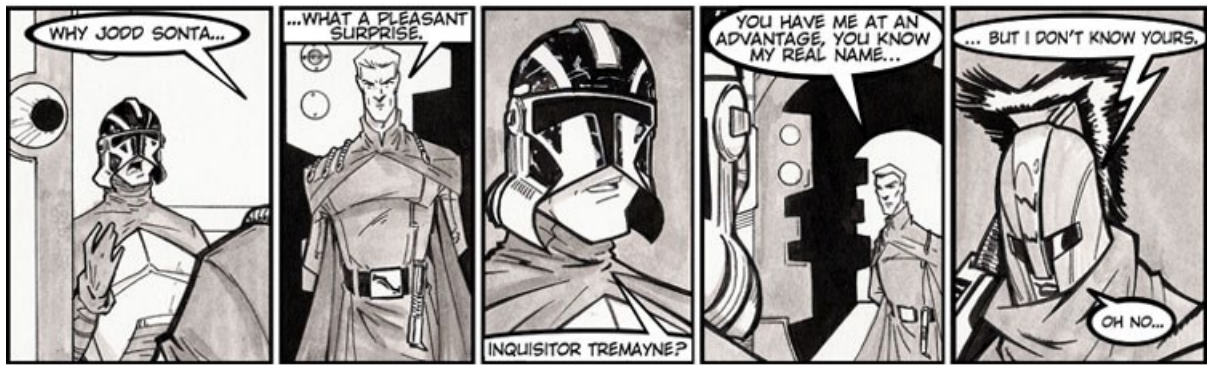








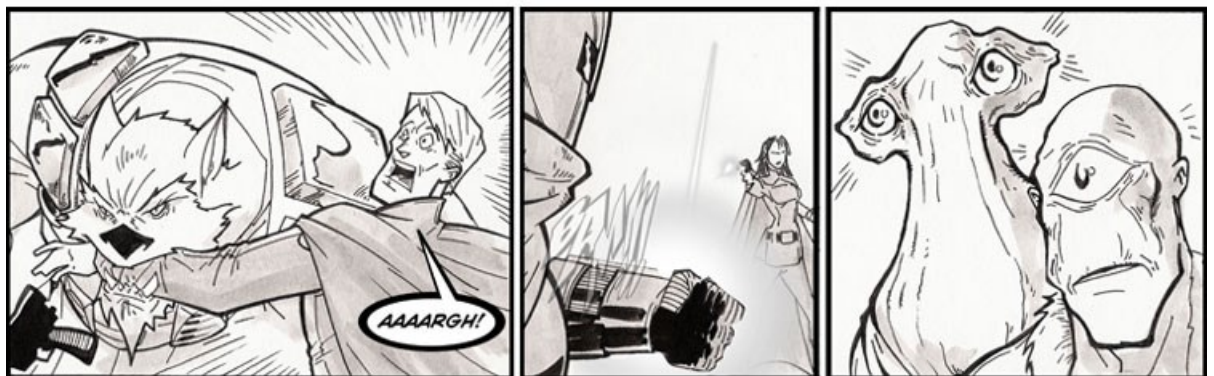
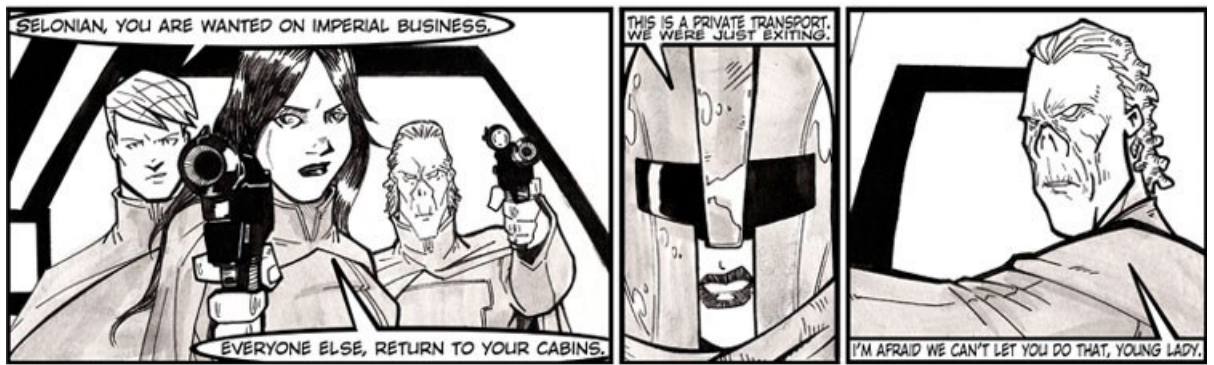












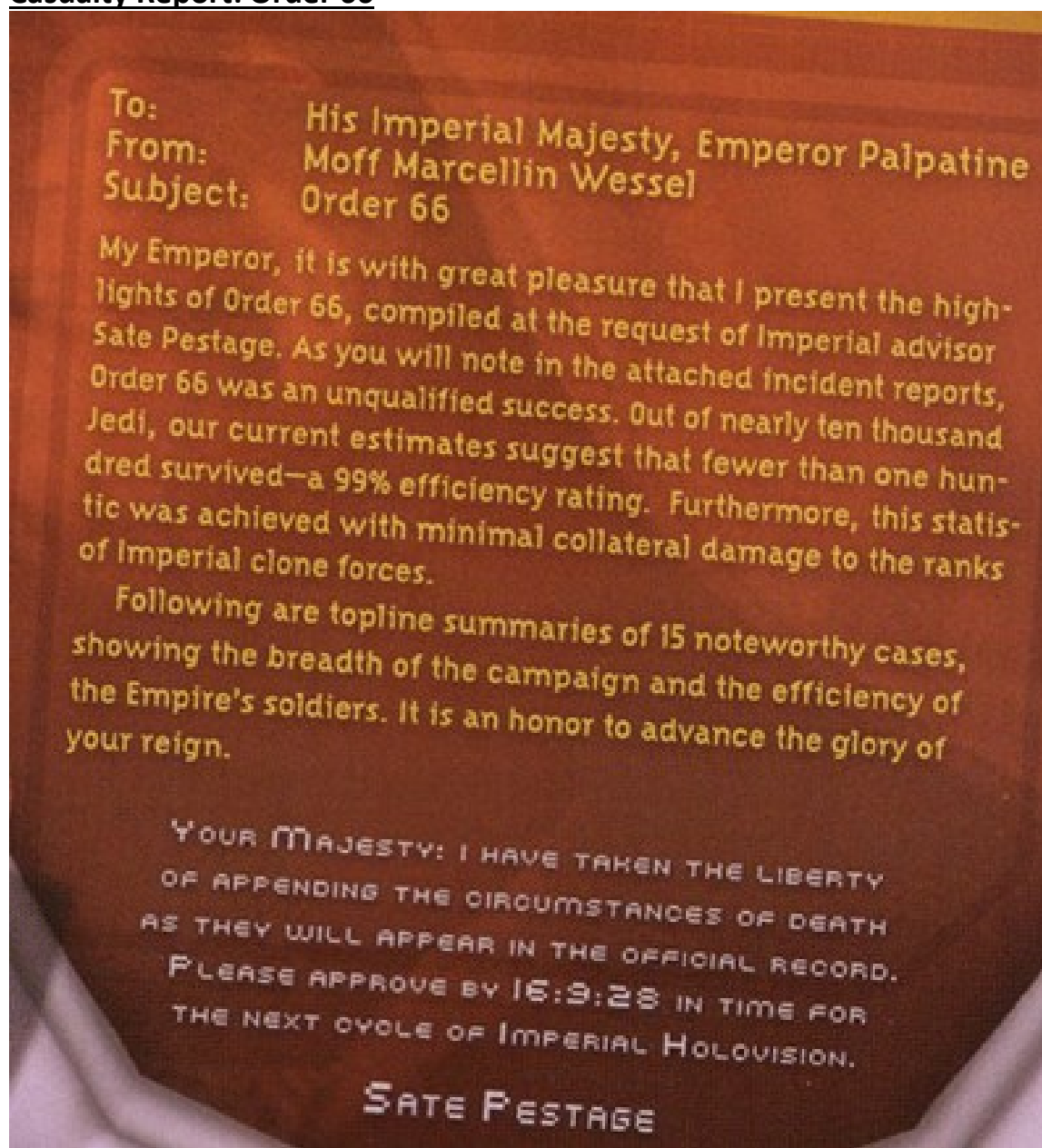








Casualty Report: Order 66





INCIDENT REPORT #890-A
NAME OF JEDI: Plo Koon
SPECIES OF JEDI: Kel Dor
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Dorin
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Cato Neimoidia
REPORT FILED BY: Captain Jag, 127th Gunship Wing

PROFILE: One of the most militaristic and dangerous of the Jedi insurgents, Plo Koon served on the Jedi Council for more than 10 years. Koon, who required goggles and an oxygen-thinning mask in atmospheres other than that of his native Dorin, studied under the Wookiee Jedi Master Tyvokka. Notorious for his fearlessness, Koon earned the admiration of the Republic's ragtag, pre-clone army when he rallied the troops to victory in the final battle of the Stark Hyperspace War in 9Br5. Koon's Padawan students included the Trandoshan Lissarkh and the human Bultar Swan (see report #890-M). His battle skills led to Republic victories in the Yinchorr Uprising and the Battle of Boz Pity. Just prior to the conclusion of the Clone Wars, Plo Koon helped pacify the Trade Federation purse world of Cato Neimoidia.

TERMINATION: Accompanying Koon on aerial patrol of Cato Neimoidia's bridge cities, Jag (CT-55/11-9009) and CT-57/11-9048 received Order 66 and fired several shots from the wing cannons of the ARC-170 starfighters belonging to the 127th. Multiple laser hits sent Koon's Jedi starfighter plunging into the heart of the bridge city, destroying a clone staging area (see casualty reports labeled CT-8770 through CT-8910).

KILLED IN A SUICIDE ATTACK AGAINST A NEIMOIDIAN GRUB-NURSERY

DATA FILE



INCIDENT REPORT #890-B
NAME OF JEDI: Aayla Secura
SPECIES OF JEDI: Twi'lek
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Ryloth
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Felucia
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Bly, 327th Star Corps

PROFILE: Apprenticed to the tainted Jedi Quinlan Vos, Aayla Secura underwent a memory wipe at the hands of her corrupt uncle during an investigation into narcotic glitteryll spice. She later fell under the influence of the vampiric Anzati Volfe Karkko, before reclaiming her memories and earning a promotion to Jedi Knight under the guidance of Master Tholme. In the final months of the Clone Wars, Secura flew air support during the siege of Saleucami. Reassigned to rescue Barriss Offee from Commerce Guild captivity on Felucia, Secura and the 327th Star Corps performed a successful extraction, then remained on-planet to prevent a Guild operation that would have rendered Felucia's water supply toxic.

TERMINATION: The troopers of the Star Corps received Order 66 while advancing on foot through the fungus forest. Quick action by the troopers took Secura by surprise, and the Jedi fell under their combined blaster fire. The 327th ensured their kill with multiple shots to the head and body.

KILLED IN THE ACT OF POISONING FELUCIA'S WATER SUPPLY

DATA FILE






INCIDENT REPORT #890-C
NAME OF JEDI: Ki-Adi-Mundi
SPECIES OF JEDI: Cerean
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Cerea
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Mygeeto
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Bacara, Galactic Marines

PROFILE: A double-brained Cerean, Ki-Adi-Mundi held an unusual position within the ranks of the Jedi. Brought into the Order at the remarkably late age of 4, he was one of the only Jedi allowed to marry and have children (due to low birthrates on his homeworld of Cerea). Ki-Adi-Mundi trained one apprentice, the pseudo-Tusken Raider A'Sharad Hett (still at large). At approximately the time of the Battle of Naboo, he earned a seat on the Jedi Council and a promotion to Jedi Master. Ki-Adi-Mundi led the failed assault on the Droid Control Ship during the Battle of Geonosis, and barely survived a fight with General Grievous on Hypori. He served as Anakin Skywalker's Jedi Master during a short period when Obi-Wan Kenobi had been classified as killed in action on Jabiim. At the time of Order 66, Ki-Adi-Mundi commanded the Galactic Marines in battle against Separatist forces on the crystal planet Mygeeto.

TERMINATION: In light of Ki-Adi-Mundi's battle prowess, the Galactic Marines elected to wait until the Jedi was most vulnerable. As the Jedi charged at Separatist tri-droids across a narrow bridge, his troopers opened fire. Two troopers died from deflected shots before Ki-Adi-Mundi succumbed to the sustained barrage.

**NEUTRALIZED WHILE ARMING AN
EXPLOSIVE DEVICE ON A MYGEETO BRIDGE**



DATA FILE

INCIDENT REPORT #890-D
NAME OF JEDI: Stass Allie
SPECIES OF JEDI: Human
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Tholoth
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Saleucami
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Neyo, 91st Reconnaissance Corps

PROFILE: Stass Allie, a Jedi Knight at the start of the Clone Wars, earned a rapid promotion to Jedi Master and a seat on the Jedi Council by the time of General Grievous' invasion of Coruscant. Cousin to former Council member Adi Gallia (killed in the Battle of Boz Pity), Allie served as a member of the Circle of Jedi Healers in addition to her battlefield responsibilities as a Jedi general. Following the pacification of the Separatists' experimental army of Morgukai clones on Saleucami, Allie patrolled the battle-damaged wilds for entrenched pockets of Separatist resistance.

TERMINATION: Commander Neyo (CC-8826) and CT-3423, accompanying Allie on speeder bike reconnaissance, received Order 66 and fired on the Jedi with the cannons of the BARC speeders operated by the 91st. Several blasts hit the rear of Allie's Aratech 74-Z speeder bike, igniting its reactor and sending it into a fatal crash.

TERMINATED EN ROUTE TO A TERRORIST RENDEZVOUS

DATA FILE

INCIDENT REPORT #890-E
NAME OF JEDI: Luminara Unduli
SPECIES OF JEDI: Mirialan
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Mirial
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Kashyyyk
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Faie, 41st Elite Legion

PROFILE: A near-human Mirialan, Luminara Unduli bore distinctive tattooing marking her as an adherent of formalized physical disciplines. Unduli helped track the pirate Arwen Cohl, a fellow native of Mirial, in the months leading up to the Battle of Naboo, and brokered a peace on Ansion prior to the outbreak of the Clone Wars. Unduli trained Barriss Offee to Knighthood, and during the Clone Wars, Unduli and Offee prevented the Separatist destruction of the crystal caves of Ilum. At the time of Order 66, Unduli held joint command of troops belonging to the 41st Elite Legion on the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk.

TERMINATION: Unduli was preoccupied with the state of the wounded from Kashyyyk's Battle of Kachirho, and therefore possessed no precognitive warning of Order 66. Troopers belonging to the 41st surrounded and eliminated Unduli with no resistance.

EXECUTED FOR CONSPIRING TO OVERTHROW THE REPUBLIC



INCIDENT REPORT #890-F
NAME OF JEDI: Barriss Offee
SPECIES OF JEDI: Mirialan
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Mirial
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Felucia
REPORT FILED BY: Lieutenant Galle, 327th Star Corps

PROFILE: Longtime Padawan to Luminara Unduli, Barriss Offee became a Jedi Knight during the Clone Wars. Her skills as a healer, made evident during a diplomatic mission to Ansion, led to her induction into the Circle of Jedi Healers and a posting with a Republic Mobile Surgical Unit on Drongar. Prior to Order 66, Offee received a reassignment to Felucia, where she worked with Aayla Secura to stop the spread of a waterborne toxin.

TERMINATION: Heavy equipment belonging to the 327th opened fire on Offee while she engaged Separatist battle droids. Multiple blasts from an AT-TE eliminated the Jedi target.

KILLED WHILE PLOTTING WITH SECURA
TO POISON FELUCIA'S WATER SUPPLY



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INCIDENT REPORT #890-G
NAME OF JEDI: Traavis
SPECIES OF JEDI: Human
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Skip 5, Smuggler's Run
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Garqi
REPORT FILED BY: RC-1013 (Sarge), Aiwha Squad

PROFILE: General Traavis fought throughout the five months of the Outer Rim Sieges, moving troopers, warships, and commandos to battlefields on the Cassandran Worlds of Monhudle, New Bakstre, and Biitu. At the time of Order 66, Traavis' forces had captured Garqi, and the general had embarked on an inspection tour of the planet's overcrowded refugee camps.

TERMINATION: The Republic commandos of Aiwha Squad arrived in the camp after escorting a displaced local child across 20 kilometers of hostile terrain. Upon receiving Order 66, the members of Aiwha Squad fired on the general simultaneously, killing him before he could counterattack.

**TERMINATED IN THE ACT OF STEALING REFUGEE CHILDREN
FOR JEDI INDOCTRINATION**



INCIDENT REPORT #890-H
NAME OF JEDI: Jocasta Nu
SPECIES OF JEDI: Human
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Coruscant
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Coruscant
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Appo, 501st Legion

PROFILE: Chief librarian and archivist of the Jedi Temple, Jocasta Nu was a key enabler of the Jedi bureaucracy and an expert in galactic history and stellar cartography. Although she was not a warrior, her control of information made her a dangerous figure who warranted priority termination. Early in her career, Nu traveled the galaxy as an archaeologist for the Jedi ExplorCorps. She eventually won a 10-year seat on the Jedi Council before stepping down to become archive caretaker. Her acquisitions included Olee Starstone (still at large) and Jerec (see report 01377B, Clone Wars, and was found in the Temple during the execution of Order 66.

TERMINATION: As the 501st eliminated armed resistance throughout the Temple, Lord Vader pursued high-profile targets. When Jocasta Nu refused to give Vader access to the Temple's emergency beacon, he killed her with a lightsaber wound to the chest.

**EXECUTED FOR HOARDING INFORMATION HARMFUL
TO THE EMPIRE AND ITS CITIZENS**



INCIDENT REPORT #890-I

NAME OF JEDI: Cin Drallig

SPECIES OF JEDI: Human

HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Lavisar

PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Coruscant

REPORT FILED BY: Commander Appo, 501st Legion

PROFILE: One of the Jedi Order's top swordsmen, Cin Drallig served as the Jedi Temple's lightsaber combat instructor. Stationed on Coruscant, he taught the basics of lightsaber combat forms one through six to thousands of students, including Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker. Also known by the nickname "Troll," Drallig trained the Padawan Serra Keto.

TERMINATION: Drallig's skills marked him as a priority target for elimination by Lord Vader. Drallig made a stand against Vader in the Temple training hall, backed by two Padawans, Bene and Whie Malreaux (see incident report #890-J). After dispatching the Padawans, Lord Vader cut down Drallig following a short exchange of lightsaber strikes. The incident was recorded by Temple security camera TR4-121.

KILLED IN COMBAT AGAINST IMPERIAL AGENTS



INCIDENT REPORT #890-J

NAME OF JEDI: Whie Malreaux

SPECIES OF JEDI: Human

HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Vjun

PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Coruscant

REPORT FILED BY: Commander Appo, 501st Legion

PROFILE: The Jedi Padawan called Whie was heir to the House Malreaux on Vjun, a fact of which he remained ignorant during his Jedi indoctrination. The rest of the population of Vjun had succumbed to widespread madness, following a disastrous bid to increase the prevalence of midi-chlorians in the bloodstream through selective breeding. During the final year of the Clone Wars, Whie accompanied Master Yoda on a mission to Vjun to open negotiations with Count Dooku. There, Separatist commander Asajj Ventress tried and failed to recruit Whie to her side. Whie had a talent for foretelling future events, and was stationed in the Jedi Temple at the time of Order 66.

TERMINATION: Whie and another Padawan, Bene, became targets when Lord Vader entered the Temple training hall in search of Cin Drallig. Vader outclassed both Padawans, and they died quickly as recorded by Temple security cam TR4-121.

NEUTRALIZED IN THE ACT OF MIND-CONTROLLING
THE CITIZENS OF THE TEMPLE DISTRICT



DATA FILE

INCIDENT REPORT #890-K
NAME OF JEDI: Zett Jukassa
SPECIES OF JEDI: Human
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Mon Gazza
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Coruscant
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Appo, 501st Legion

PROFILE: Born Warpoc Skamini to ore traders Semblic and Ashielle Skamini on Mon Gazza, Zett Jukassa knew only the Jedi Order, having been raised in the Temple from infancy. He developed a talent for farseeing at age 7 following the murder of his distant parents, when images of the crime suddenly manifested themselves as psychic flashes. Believing that Jukassa's abilities could help solve the murder case, the Jedi Council broke protocol and allowed Jukassa to learn the truth of his heritage, which led to the arrest of Black Sun enforcers. Jukassa became the Padawan of Mierme Unill, and grew into a capable swordsman by the age of 10 under the tutelage of Cin Drallig. At the time of Order 66, Jukassa was awaiting reassignment in the Jedi Temple.

TERMINATION: Jukassa became a target of opportunity for the 501st when he broke from the Temple in a rush to reach the hangar landing platform. Jukassa wounded Commander Appo and killed several troopers before Sergeant Fox eliminated him. A civilian, Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan, witnessed the incident, and escaped in an air-speeder. The 501st did not pursue.

SHOT WHILE THREATENING SENATOR ORGANA



INCIDENT REPORT #890-L
NAME OF JEDI: Tsui Choi
SPECIES OF JEDI: Aleena
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Aleen
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Kessel
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Bow, 501st Legion

PROFILE: An Aleena Jedi Master, Tsui Choi fought with distinction in the Yinchorri Uprising. Though he lost his Padawan, Theen Fida, during the conflict, his actions against the Yinchorri put him on the short list for promotion to the Jedi Council. The opportunity did not materialize, however, and Tsui Choi's relatively low profile allowed him to escape notice in the first weeks following Order 66. After one month on the run, Choi attended the conclave of Jedi fugitives on Kessel.

TERMINATION: On the orders of the Emperor, the 501st arrived on Kessel to assist Lord Vader in the elimination of the renegades. By the time of the arrival of the 501st, Choi had severed Vader's cyborg right hand with his lightsaber. Vader, enraged, suspended Choi in a Force grip, and several troopers terminated the Jedi with blaster fire.

EXECUTED FOR SPICE TRAFFICKING



INCIDENT REPORT #890-M
NAME OF JEDI: Bultar Swan
SPECIES OF JEDI: Human
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Kuat
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Kessel
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Bow, 501st Legion

PROFILE: Bultar Swan apprenticed under Jedi Council member Micah Giiett until Giiett's death in the Yinchorri Uprising, then received further training from Council member Plo Koon (see incident report #890-A). Swan developed a unique lightsaber style marked by minimal movements and sudden bursts of aggression, yet prior to Geonosis, she had never taken a life. During the Clone Wars, Swan fought at Geonosis and Aargonar, and was one of the few to escape the initial wave of Order 66 terminations. After one month in hiding, Swan joined other Jedi fugitives on Kessel.

TERMINATION: Lord Vader raided the Kessel assembly alone, minutes ahead of the 501st. According to Vader's report, Bultar Swan died when stabbed by her battle-maddened fellow Jedi, Koffi Arana.



MURDERED BY HER OWN KIND IN A WAR FOR JEDI SUPREMACY

INCIDENT REPORT #890-N
NAME OF JEDI: Koffi Arana
SPECIES OF JEDI: Human
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Turkhana
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Kessel
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Bow, 501st Legion

PROFILE: Jedi Master Koffi Arana participated in the Battle of Boz Pity at the tail end of the Clone Wars. He managed to escape the first wave of Order 66 executions, slipping underground for several weeks until summoned to the conclave of Jedi survivors on Kessel. Lord Vader interrupted the Jedi meeting alone, without immediate backup.

TERMINATION: According to Lord Vader's report, Koffi Arana killed fellow Jedi Bultar Swan in a struggle over a weapon, and Vader stabbed Arana moments later. The Jedi was dead by the time the 501st arrived on the scene.



SLAUGHTERED BY HIS FELLOW JEDI IN A MAD SCRAMBLE FOR POWER

ADDENDUM: INCIDENT REPORT #890-0
NAME OF JEDI: Roan Shryne
SPECIES OF JEDI: Human
HOMEWORLD OF JEDI: Weytta
PLANET OF JEDI TERMINATION: Kashyyyk
REPORT FILED BY: Commander Bow, 501st Legion



PROFILE: Discovered by Jedi acquisition agents at the relatively late age of 3, Roan Shryne became a Jedi initiate after his father surrendered custody to the Order (despite direct opposition from Shryne's mother). Shryne exhibited a talent for sensing the Force in others, though he refused an appointment to the Jedi Acquisition Division. Shryne apprenticed under Master Nat-Sem, and trained two Padawans, both of whom died during the Clone Wars. The Jedi escaped the first wave of Order 66 terminations on Murkhana, when a band of deviant clone troopers traitorously refused to carry out their orders. Shryne joined forces with the Padawan Olee Starstone and other fugitives, and Lord Vader and the 501st Legion tracked them down on Kashyyyk.

TERMINATION: Troopers of the 501st engaged Wookiee fighters in the settlement of Kachirho, while Lord Vader duelled the young Padawan Starstone. Shryne appropriated a lightsaber from a fallen Jedi and decapitated the commander of the 501st, Appo (CC-1119). Orbital bombardment from the Star Destroyer Exactor neutralized further resistance from the natives, and Vader fought and killed Shryne.

EXECUTED FOR DISRUPTING AN IMPERIAL RECRUITMENT EFFORT

I TRUST THAT YOUR MAJESTY
IS PLEASED BY THE
PROFESSIONALISM OF THE
EMPIRE'S SOLDIERS AS
EVIDENCED BY THE THOROUGH
ERADICATION OF THE JEDI
REBELLION. MAY YOUR REIGN
LAST FOR A THOUSAND YEARS!



Mist Encounter

The last two jumps had been marginal, skating the Starwayman right to the edge of known space and even a little bit past it. The theory, at least as far as Booster Terrik's fatigue-fogged mind could remember, was that no commander would be crazy enough to risk a Victory-class Star Destroyer chasing a nobody smuggler into uncharted territory.

So far the theory hadn't worked. Maybe third time would be the lucky charm they so desperately needed.

Or maybe third time would bring the Starwayman out of hyperspace just in time to smash itself all over a planetary-sized mass. There were reasons why jumping blind into unknown space was considered to be a stupid idea.

Beside Terrik, his Borlovian partner Llollulion gave a five-tiered whistle. "Yeah, okay," Terrik said, getting a grip on the hyperdrive levers and trying not to think about the unknown star system and its unknown planetary-sized masses directly ahead of them. "Let's see if maybe they were smart enough to give up this time."

He pushed the levers forward, and the mottled sky of hyperspace faded into starlines and then into a starry sky. Directly ahead, the system's star was a tiny distant disk blazing with yellow-white light. Bracing himself, Terrik peered into the aft display:

And with a flicker of pseudomotion, the Star Destroyer appeared behind them. Terrik sighed, too exhausted even to swear. So that was that. He couldn't lose the Star Destroyer, he couldn't outrun it, and he sure as mynocks couldn't outfight it. The options had squeezed down to surrendering, or getting summarily blown to atoms.

He could only hope that the latter option wasn't the only one the commander back there was interested in.

Llollulion gave a sudden three-tiered warble. "You're kidding," Terrik frowned, turning to look. "Where?"

Llollulion pointed out the canopy to the right with its beard feathers. It was a planet, all right: full-sized, close enough to its primary for adequate warmth, its fuzzy edge evidence of a reasonably thick atmosphere.

And it was barely ten minutes full-throttle flight away.

Llollulion warbled again. "You got it, partner," Terrik agreed, throwing power to the sublight engines and turning the Starwayman hard to starboard. They couldn't escape, outrun, or outfight their pursuers.

Maybe they could hide from them.

"Target has changed course, Captain," a voice called up from the crew pit. "They're making a run for that planet."

"Acknowledged," Captain Voss Parck said through clenched teeth as he watched their quarry driving hard for planetfall. Of course the smugglers were making for the planet- what other options did they have? He'd anticipated this move from the moment the Strikefast had come out of hyperspace, and had already given orders to counter it.

Orders which inexplicably had not yet been carried out. "Lieutenant, what's keeping those TIE fighters?" he barked toward the comm officer.

"Hangar Bay Control reports they're having trouble getting them released from their racks, sir," the officer said. "They have two free, but the rest-"

"They have two free?" Parck cut him off. "What are they waiting for? Launch them!"

"Yes, sir."

Parck stalked down the walkway, swearing viciously under his breath. Between sky-headed techs who insisted on continually redesigning perfectly workable equipment and rule-bound officers who didn't have the brains to modify Standard launch-order procedure when necessary, the entire Fleet was sliding straight into the dump tubes.

But that would be changing soon. Barely a week earlier the news had reached the Outer Rim that President Palpatine had declared himself Emperor

of the newly restructured Empire, and had personally committed himself to taking charge of this mess. Some of the ranking officers of the Fleet had already gone on record expressing reservations about the whole situation; for himself, Parck had no doubt that Palpatine and his visionary politics would soon whip things into shape.

A movement off the starboard bow caught his eye: the two TIE fighters, finally heading out in their belated pursuit of the smugglers. He looked back at the quarry ship, did a rapid mental calculation.

"Tell Hangar Bay Control to get the rest of those TIEs in space," he ordered the comm officer. "The quarry is going to make it down before these two catch up. We're going to have to smoke them out."

But smoke them out he would. That ship was carrying cargo he suspected was for one of the small but noisy resistance groups that had been springing up lately in opposition to Palpatine's New Order. The location of that group would be a fine prize to present to the new Emperor...and he and the Strikefast had not come all the way out here into Unknown Space only to lose that prize.

They were into the upper atmosphere, and looking for a good place to hide, when Llollulion began picking up the power emanations.

"Uh-oh," Terrik muttered, throwing a quick look at the display as he fought the controls against the atmospheric buffeting. It was a power source, all right, sitting all by itself in the middle of an equatorial forest a quarter of the way to the planetary horizon. "Not good. Double not good."

Llollulion multi-warbled a question. "Because it's just the right size for a small-base power generator, that's why," Terrik told him. "Out here in the middle of nowhere, that means either a smuggler or pirate base. Or maybe even a small Fleet exploratory outpost. Regardless, it's no one who's going to be happy to see us."

Still...Terrik bit thoughtfully at his lip. Those two fighters behind them were getting closer by the minute; even if he ran the Starwayman to ground right now they would be able to lock onto the ship's power plant before he could shut everything down. But if he ran past that other power source first, there was a chance it would baffle the pursuers' sensors just enough to let him slip away without his landing being pinpointed.

It was worth a try, anyway. "Hang on; I'm changing course," he warned Llollulion, throwing the Starwayman into a flat sideways slip. "You got the triad on line yet?"

The Borlovian warbled an affirmative. "Okay," Terrik said. "Soon as those fighters get in range, see what you can do about taking them out."

They had reached the forest and were flying at treetop level by the time Llollulion opened up with the Starwayman's laser triad; and it was quickly apparent that the pursuing TIE fighters hadn't spent nearly enough time in atmospheric combat training. A half dozen exchanges of intense laser fire, and Llollulion warbled a seven-tiered whistle of triumph.

"Yeah, great," Terrik growled, feeling a drop of sweat roll down his cheek as he hunched over the controls. One of the TIE fighters was already a blazing mass of rubble in the forest far behind them, and the other was spinning out of control a hundred meters to starboard, rapidly heading downward toward the same oblivion.

But the Starwayman had taken some damage, too, and they were almost to the unknown power source dead ahead. The inhabitants there were surely alerted to the approaching ships by now. If they weren't interested in receiving company...

The second TIE fighter disappeared into the trees with a tremendous crash; and an instant later the Starwayman was shooting over a small clearing. Terrik caught a glimpse of a single small house, something that looked like a storage shed on one side and a pair of large metallic boxes on the other-

And then they were past, over forest again and heading for arising line of crevice-pocked cliffs in the near distance. Llollulion warbled urgently- "Give me a second, will you?" Terrik growled back, throwing the Starwayman hard to the left. "I didn't forget we're going to ground. What, you want me to land right next to that place back there?"

Llollulion subsided, grumping audibly to himself. But Terrik didn't care.

The trick had worked- maybe- and that was all that counted.

The Starwayman was in one of the cliffside caves, shielded from sight and powered down, before the next wave of TIE fighters went burning past overhead.

"This is not," Captain Parck's voice came darkly in Colonel Mosh Barris's ears, "precisely the news I wanted to hear, Colonel. You absolutely sure about this?"

"Yes, sir," Barris said, gazing at the tall rectangular boxes that stood beside the house they'd found in the clearing, a sour taste in his mouth. "The markings on the power generators alone show that much- our 3PO translator droid has never seen anything like them."

"That doesn't necessarily prove anything," Parck persisted. "These nearer edges of Unknown Space have surely been penetrated by the occasional trader or smuggler. This could easily be the home or retreat of such a Human or known alien, who just happened to pick up a couple along his way."

"That's possible, sir," Barris said. "But I think it unlikely. The buildings themselves appear to have been constructed out of local materials, but a fair number of the contents are also of unknown origin. My guess is that we're looking at the survivor of a shipwreck here."

"Who then wandered off somewhere and died," Parck grumbled.

"Or else ran when he heard us coming," Barris said. "We can't tell how long the place has been deserted. Either way, we're stuck with the fact that it's definitely an alien encampment."

There was the faint hiss of a sigh in Barris's ears. A sigh, and the hint of a curse beneath it. "And therefore stuck with the UAE Orders."

"Yes, sir," Barris agreed, silently seconding the captain's curse. The Unknown Alien Encounters section of the standing orders were a relic from the glory days of the Republic, when a new alien species was being discovered every other week and the Senate was falling over itself in its eagerness to throw full membership privileges at every shaggy or lumpy creature a Dreadnaught or Carrack cruiser happened to stumble across. The modern Fleet had no business handling such chores, and even less interest in doing so, and the High Command had repeatedly said so.

Barris had heard rumors that Emperor Palpatine had privately assured the High Command that the burden of the outmoded contact orders would soon be revoked.

But for the moment they were still on the lists, and far too many of the Senators supported them. Which meant there was nothing to do but obey them.

"Very well," Parck growled. "Looks like you're going to be spending at least one night down there- better have your men make themselves comfortable. I'll have a tech analysis team put together and sent down to take a look. Keep an eye out in case your castaway comes back."

"We will," Barris assured him. "What about the smugglers?"

"The TIE fighters are still looking for them," Parck said. "If they haven't spotted the ship by the time you finish there, we'll switch to a ground search."

"Colonel Barris?" an anxious voice cut in on the circuit. "This is Lieutenant Kavren at the TIE fighter crash site just west of the encampment. Sorry to interrupt, sir, but I really think you'd better come see this. "

Barris frowned across the clearing, to where the lights of the search crew could occasionally be seen illuminating the tendrils of evening mist that were beginning to waft through the trees. He wouldn't have pegged Kavren for the excitable type, but there'd been a definite queasiness in the man's voice. "I'll be right there," he said. "With your permission Captain?"

"Go ahead, Colonel," Parck said. "We'll talk later."

The reflection of the lights from the mist was somewhat deceptive, but it was still no more than a three-minute walk from the edge of the clearing to the blackened slash where the TIE fighter had blazed to the ground and its fiery death. A few more seconds in the air, Barris thought sourly, and there wouldn't have been anything left of the alien encampment for them to study. Pity.

Kavren and four troopers were waiting as Barris reached them. The lieutenant's back was unnaturally stiff; the faces of the troopers grim beneath

the brims of their black helmets. Lying in the grass at their feet was the limp form of the dead TIE pilot, his flight suit burned and torn.

"We found it right here, Colonel," Kavren said, gesturing down at the flight suit. "Several meters away from the main wreckage. Take a look. "

Barris lowered himself to one knee beside the body. The helmet had been loosened from the neck of the flight suit, and the long front fastener opened. And the flight suit stuffed with-

"What in blazes?" he demanded, frowning at it.

"It's grass, sir," Kavren confirmed, a slight trembling in his voice. "Grass, leaves, and a lot of those funny-smelling red berries. And that's all. The body's gone."

Barris looked around him at the trees and the tendrils of mist floating between them on the light breeze, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Have you looked for him?"

"Not yet, sir," Kavren said. "I thought it would be better to alert you first. If there are savages in the area..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't really have to. Like most officers of the Fleet, Barris had had his share of run-ins with native savages. "Major Wyan?" he called into his comlink, straightening up. "This is Colonel Barris."

"Yes, Colonel," the major's voice came in his ears.

"I want a troop perimeter set up around the encampment immediately," Barris ordered. Something off to the side at the base of a bush caught his eye, and he stepped over for a closer look. It was the TIE fighter's survival pack, torn open. "We've got native savages out here."

"Understood," Wyan said, his voice suddenly brisk and professional. He'd had experience with native savages, too. "There's a troop carrier almost ready to leave the Strikefast; I'll call up and have them put another squad of troopers aboard."

"Better make it a platoon," Barris told him, crouching down beside the survival pack and pulling it open. "Looks like they've made off with the pilot's blaster, spare power packs, and concussion grenades."

"Terrific," Wyan growled. "Primitives with weapons. Just what we need. "

"Maybe they'll be considerate enough to blow themselves to pieces before they get to us," Barris said, picking up the pack and standing up again.

"We can always hope, sir," Wyan agreed. "I'll get the security procedures started right away."

"Good. Barris out." Barris stepped back over to the knot of troopers and handed the looted survival pack to Kavren. "I want the flight suit and its contents taken back to the encampment for study, Lieutenant. Then take some troopers and start searching the area. I want the pilot's body found."

"Sir," Major Wyan said, stepping up to the examination table and stiffening briefly in salute. "The security perimeter is in place."

"Good," Barris said, glancing up through the roof of the transparent weather canopy at the sky. About time, too. Full night was here, and with nightfall inevitably came nocturnal predators. Not to mention unfriendly natives. "Any news from the search team?" "Still no sign of the pilot's body," Wyan said. "They've found a lot of bits and pieces from the survival pack, though, scattered around like animals had been at it. Maybe our primitives just tore the thing apart without actually keeping any of it."

"Maybe," Barris said. "But until we actually find that blaster, I suggest you continue to assume someone's pointing it at us."

"Yes, sir." Wyan gestured at the table. "So that's what was in the flight suit?"

"Yes," Barris said, looking back at the collection of plant life spread across the examination table and the two techs still sifting through it. An odd aroma permeated the air, probably from the berries that had been crushed for analysis. "So far it seems to be just local grass and leaves and those berries. Some kind of religious ritual, maybe-"

And without warning, there was the flash and thundercrack of an explosion from behind them.

"Cover!" Barris shouted, spinning around and dropping to one knee as he hauled out his blaster. Halfway to the edge of the clearing a patch of grass was smoldering with the afterburn of the explosion; beyond it, troopers were running toward the closest part of the sentry line, blasters drawn and ready.

Someone flicked a searchlight on behind Barris, the brilliant light sweeping across the forest and lighting up the thickening tendrils of mist flowing between the trees. Barris followed the spot of light with his eyes, gripping his blaster tightly as he tried to glimpse the enemy who was attacking them-

And was slammed to the ground as a second explosion came from practically right behind him.

"Colonel!" he heard Wyan shout through the ringing in his ears.

"I'm all right," Barris shouted back, twisting around on his stomach. A masterfully direct hit: the collection of grasses and leaves on the examination table was burning brilliantly, the table itself canted noticeably by the blast. On the ground behind it, the two techs were flat on their stomachs, doing their best to squeeze themselves into the grass.

The general comlink channel had come alive with terse orders and reports. Barris kept out of it, staying where he was and bracing himself for the inevitable third explosion.

But the inevitable failed to happen. "All perimeter troopers have checked in," Wyan reported a minute later, crawling closer to Barris's side. "They're doing a complete search of the first twenty meters of forest, but so far there's nothing. Whoever they were, they seem to have gone."

"Considering no one apparently saw anything in the first place, the fact they don't see anything now is not a lot of comfort," Barris retorted, getting cautiously to his feet and brushing himself off with his free hand.

"It's getting pretty misty out there," Wyan said. "Makes for poor visibility."

"Our natives don't seem to be having any trouble with it," Barris said pointedly. "What in blazes were those blasts, anyway? They weren't powerful enough to be concussion grenades."

"I agree, sir," Wyan said. "My guess is they were blaster power packs with the sturm dowels pulled out."

An odd feeling shivered down Barris's back. "That doesn't sound like something savages would be able to figure out," he said.

"I know," Wyan agreed. "You suppose our alien has come back?"

Barris stared out into the darkness of the forest. "Or else our smugglers have."

"Mm," Wyan said thoughtfully. "Trying to scare us away, you think?"

"Or else trying to get us running in circles." Barris keyed his helmet comlink for long-range. "Strikefast, this is Colonel Barris."

"Captain Parck here," Parck's voice came immediately. "What's happening down there?"

"We were attacked," Barris told him. "Two explosions in the encampment, neither doing significant damage."

"The attackers?"

"No sign of them so far. We're still searching."

"Maybe they lobbed the explosives in from a distance," Parck said. "I'll have a wing of TIE fighters do a flyover. Stand by. "

Barris keyed off and stepped back to the examination table. Yes; some sort of powerful catapult, fired from far outside the sentry perimeter. That would explain why no one had spotted anything.

He stopped, looking up at the strips of shredded weather canopy rippling gently in the breeze. No, that didn't work. Anything coming in from above

would have had to get through the canopy before it hit the table. It couldn't have done that without him hearing something. Could it?

Something moved at the edge of Barris's eye. He twitched his blaster around, but it was only some small night creature scurrying across the clearing. "Major Wyan?" he called.

"Yes, Colonel?" Wyan said, stepping around the nose of the troop carrier.

"Get some floodlights set up," Barris ordered, pointing to the trees. "I want the whole rim of the forest lit up like the inside of a spark module- that should help burn off some of this mist, too. Also, fine-mesh the hemisphere sensor screen. I don't want any more explosives getting through without us at least knowing they're coming."

Wyan's reply was lost in the sudden roar as a pair of TIE fighters shot past at treetop level. "What?" Barris asked.

"I was pointing out that there are a lot of avians and avian-sized things flying around," Wyan repeated. "Small ground animals, too- I nearly twisted my ankle stepping on one a minute ago. If we fine-mesh the screen too far down, we'll have alarms triggering all night. "

Barris grimaced; but the major was right. "All right, then, forget the fine-meshing," he growled. "Just get those lights-"

And suddenly, directly ahead, the nearest trees were silhouetted by a fireball erupting out of the forest in the distance. "What the- ?" Wyan barked.

"TIE crash!" Barris snapped, viciously keying his comlink. "Crash team to the troop carrier-now!"

He had keyed off the comlink, and was just starting to swear, when the distant thunder of the crash rolled across the encampment.

"You have no idea what brought it down?" Parck's voice asked in Barris's ears.

"Not yet, sir," Barris said, his stomach churning with a simmering anger. "The crash team just got back with the fighter's recording rod. And the pilot's body."

Parck rumbled something under his breath. "At least you got there before the natives had time to steal this one."

"No, sir, they didn't get the body," Barris said. "But they did have time to ransack his survival pack again. The crash team found it torn open and the contents scattered around, just like the last time."

"And no sign of the blaster, power packs, or concussion grenades?"

"No, sir." For a long moment there was silence on the channel, and Barris found himself gazing across the encampment at the forest. The floodlights he'd ordered had been set up just inside the clearing, bathing the forest in brilliance. Insects and night avians swarmed and buzzed through the area, clearly confused by the artificial daylight, the larger ones throwing quick-moving shadows against the trees.

"You're the man on the scene, Colonel," Parck said at last. "But in my opinion, this has gone way beyond natives making a nuisance of themselves. Are you certain the smugglers aren't involved?"

"I've been wondering that myself, Captain," Barris said. "It could be there's something nearby they don't want us to find and are trying to pin us down here."

"That might explain the attacks themselves," Parck agreed. "What about the flight suit stuffed with grass?"

"Probably a feint," Barris said. "Something to convince us we were only dealing with native primitives."

"Unless we're dealing with both the smugglers and primitives," Parck suggested. "That might-just a minute," he interrupted himself. "Colonel, did you examine the flight suit itself?"

"I-" Barris frowned. "Now that you mention it, sir, I don't think so. We were more interested in the-"

"Go look at it now," Parck cut him off. "Specifically, check whether or not the comlink has been removed from the helmet."

It took a couple of minutes to find where the techs had stored the suit. It took ten seconds more to confirm that the comlink was indeed missing.

"Clever little snakes," Parck murmured when Barris had given him the news. "One might even say inspired. What about the second flight suit, the one you just brought back to the encampment?"

"It's being checked now," Barris told him, looking over to where Major Wyan and one of the troopers were going over it. "Major?"

"The comlink's still here," Wyan confirmed. "They must not have had time to remove it."

"Or decided not to bother," Barris pointed out. "They could already eavesdrop on our communications."

"Not for long they can't," Parck said with grim satisfaction. "I've ordered the circuit that comlink is on to be shut down."

"Yes, sir," Barris said, wincing. Bad enough that the smugglers had gotten away with their theft this long. But to have his commanding officer be the one to pick up on it... "They must still be in the area. I'll get some patrols organized and try to smoke them out."

"There's no rush, Colonel," Parck said. "As a matter of fact, I'd rather you stay put until first light. Your sensors are going to be of limited use in a forest, and there's no sense exposing your men to ambush in the darkness."

"As you wish, Captain," Barris said, feeling his face warming.

"Good," Parck said. "We'll speak further in the morning. Good night, Colonel. Stay alert."

"Yes, sir," Barris said between clenched teeth. "Good night, Captain."

He jabbed the comlink off. "Doesn't sound to me like the Captain has a very high opinion of our troopers," Major Wyan said, coming up beside him.

"Can you blame him?" Barris retorted.

"Under the circumstances, I suppose not," Wyan conceded. "What now?"

"We make our smuggler friends very sorry indeed that they tangled with us, that's what," Barris growled. "First thing I want you to do is double-check the security perimeter again- I don't want anything else getting through tonight."

"Yes, sir. And after that?"

Barris looked out at the brightly lit forest, a fresh surge of anger mixing with the humiliation in his stomach. No smuggler was going to make a fool of him. Or if he did, he wasn't going to live to gloat about it. "After that, you and I are going to sit down with the aerial survey maps, the long-range tracking data from the Strikefast, and anything else we can get our hands on. And we're going to figure out how to find those smugglers."

Almost inaudible over the busy insect twitterings, another distant boom drifted in dully on the cool night breeze. Terrik paused in his work, cocking an ear toward the mouth of the cave and listening hard. It was the fourth such explosion in the past five hours, by his count, not counting that aircraft crash just after sundown. None of the blasts had sounded any closer to them than the first had.

It was the Imperials, of course. But what in space were they playing at?

A shadow moved silently against the starlight streaming through the mouth of the cave. Reflexively, Terrik reached for his blaster; relaxed as he saw it was only Llollulion. "You see anything?" he called softly.

The Borlovian's five-tiered whistle was equally soft, and as negative as each of the previous times. "You know, this doesn't make any sense at all," Terrik complained, walking over to his partner's side and staring down at the misty forest below. "There aren't nearly enough explosions for it to be a concussion spread. But there are too many for it to be nervous troopers throwing grenades at each other's shadows."

For a long minute there was just the sound of the insects. Terrik strained his ears, but there were no more explosions. And then, almost diffidently, Lollulion made a suggestion. "Oh, come on," Terrik scoffed. "That was definitely a one-man house- two-man at the very outside. Who in the galaxy would be crazy enough to take on a couple of troop carriers worth of Imperials by himself?"

Still, now that he thought about it, the sound of those blasts did seem to be coming more or less from the direction of the settlement they'd flown over. And the power emanations they'd picked up had implied the place was currently occupied. So who in the galaxy would be crazy enough to take on all those Imperials by himself?

Lollulion warbled again. "Okay, so a pair of Crintlans might take on odds like that to protect their territory," Terrik growled. "Don't try to tell me it would take the Imperials four grenades to deal with two Crintlans."

Another dull explosion drifted in on the breeze. "Five grenades," Terrik amended. "Anyway, it's none of our business."

Lollulion gave a six-tiered whistle- "I said it's none of our business," Terrik insisted. "You want to dodge a couple squads of Imperial troopers and try to contact whoever's out there, be my guest. Me, I'm going to stay right here."

The Borlovian reared his head back in surprise, his beard feathers stiffening. "Don't look at me like that," Terrik snapped. "I have nothing against picking up allies when it gains us anything. Only this time, it doesn't. We're in Unknown Space, remember? Odds are this is some unknown alien we wouldn't even be able to talk to. And even if we could, who says he'd even want to join forces?"

Terrik spun around and headed back toward the Starwayman. "Besides," he said over his shoulder, "all we really want from an ally right now is for him to keep the Imperials busy. And he's already doing that. Let's leave well enough alone, and get this bucket of bolts ready to fly again."

They had five casualties among the sentry perimeter troopers that night. Three of them had died by the hand of the unseen enemy, their chests or heads blown apart by concussion grenades. No one had seen anything, either before the attacks or afterward. The other two casualties had been

accidentally shot by their own nervous comrades, who had mistaken them for intruders in the misty darkness.

And by the time dawn began to lighten the sky, Barris had had enough.

"I suggest you try to calm yourself, Colonel," Parck said, his voice maddeningly calm. "I know it's been a bad night for you-

"Sir, I've lost five men tonight," Barris cut him off harshly. It wasn't the most politic way to speak to a superior officer; but Barris wasn't feeling especially politic at the moment. "That doesn't even count the three TIE pilots and fighters we lost yesterday evening. I strongly recommend we abandon this site and return to the Strikefast. And that we then burn the entire forest down from orbit."

"You're tired, Colonel," Parck said. His voice was still calm, but it suddenly had an edge to it. "You're also not thinking straight. Killing the smugglers won't get us the location of that resistance group we're looking for. You think a burned-out freighter will be an appropriate prize to take back to Emperor Palpatine? "

"I'm not interested in prizes, Captain," Barris said stiffly. "I'm interested in not wasting any more of my men."

"You won't have to," Parck said. "A troop carrier is on its way down with two squads of my stormtroopers. They'll be relieving your troopers."

"They've already arrived," Barris growled, looking across the clearing to where the last of the faceless, white-armored stormtroopers was just disappearing into the forest. Their unasked-for presence was a blatant insult to the quality of Barris's own troopers; at the moment, Barris didn't care about that, either. "And if you want my opinion, sir, they're not going to have any better luck finding the smugglers than my troopers did. Smoking them out from orbit is our best option."

"I'll keep your recommendation in mind, Colonel," Parck said, his voice cool. "In the meantime, I suggest you get some rest. The stormtroopers can handle things from here on-

And without warning, Parck's voice dissolved in a roar of static.

Barris jabbed at the comlink control and the static cut off, leaving his ears ringing painfully. "Full alert!" he shouted, pulling his blaster and running toward the sentry perimeter. "All troopers, full alert. Major Wyan, where are you?"

"Here, sir," Wyan said, coming across the clearing from the perimeter to Barris's right. "All comlink channels are out."

"I know," Barris gritted. "Enough is enough. There are eighteen stormtroopers beating the bushes out there- send some troopers out to recall them. We're pulling out."

Wyan's mouth fell open slightly. "We're leaving, sir?"

"Yes," Barris bit out. "Any objections?"

The major's lip twitched. Perhaps he'd been listening in on Barris's conversation with Captain Parck. "No, sir, no objections. What about that?" He jerked a thumb at the alien encampment.

An encampment they hadn't much gotten around to studying; and there were high-placed idealists in the Senate who would probably make trouble for them if they left here without a thorough examination.

But there was an answer for that, too. "We'll take it with us," Barris said.

Wyan mouth dropped another couple of millimeters. "We'll what?"

"I said we'll take it with us," Barris repeated impatiently. "Plenty of room in the transport for all of it. Tell the techs to break out the heavy load lifters and get busy- I want everything aboard in half an hour. Move it!"

Wyan swallowed visibly. "Yes, sir," he said, and headed toward the alien house at a brisk trot.

Cautiously, Barris tried the comlink. But it was still being blanketed by the jamming static, and with a curse he shut it off again.

With a curse, and a painfully tight sensation in his stomach. There was only one reason to jam their communications: after the sniping of the previous night, the unseen enemy out there was preparing to launch a major attack. Stepping over into the partial cover of one of the troop carriers, making sure he was within shouting range of the entire Imperial encampment, he got a good grip on his blaster and prepared for battle.

But once again, the enemy refused to play to his expectations. Within ten minutes the first of the stormtroopers began to reemerge from the forest in response to the orders from Barris's messengers. The comlink jamming continued as the rest of the Imperials returned to the encampment, but the attack Barris had anticipated never materialized. And within his stipulated half hour, the alien encampment was packed aboard the transport and they were ready to leave.

Except for a single, tiny hitch. One of the eighteen stormtroopers was missing.

"What do you mean, missing?" Barris demanded as three of the stormtroopers headed purposefully into the forest again, four of their comrades taking up backstop positions just inside the clearing behind them. "I thought these were the new elite of Palpatine's new military. How could one of them be missing?"

"I don't know, sir," Wyan said, looking around. "But I've come to the conclusion you were right. The sooner we get out of here, the better."

Abruptly, Barris came to a decision. To blazes with the stormtroopers- if they wanted to go looking for more trouble, that was their business. "Have all techs board the transport," he ordered Wyan. "The troopers will follow, in standard retreat/guard order. We'll leave as soon as everyone's aboard."

"What about the stormtroopers?" Wyan asked.

"They've got the troop carrier they came down in," Barris said. "They can stay behind and beat the bushes to their hearts' content."

He turned toward the transport the techs had just finished loading, caught sight of one of the stormtroopers standing rigid guard just outside the hatchway. "You- stormtrooper- go tell your commander-"

He never finished the sentence. Without twitch or warning, the storm trooper abruptly dissolved in a brilliant explosion.

Barris was flat on the ground in an instant, his ears aching from the sound of the blast. "Alert!" he shouted automatically, searching the nearest forest edge for any sign of the attacker. But as always, there was nothing. A handful of troopers- brave or suicidal, Barris wasn't sure which- were charging that direction anyway. For all the good that would do.

Beside him, Wyan gave a sudden, awe-struck curse. "Colonel- look at that."

Barris swiveled on his stomach to face the transport again. The smoke of the explosion was clearing away, revealing that the ship itself had sustained only minor damage. Mostly cosmetic, in fact, and nothing that should interfere with light operation or hull integrity.

He lowered his eyes to the crumpled form of the stormtrooper-

And sucked in his breath in shock. The armor, no longer white, was scattered about in bits and pieces in a small radius around the spot where the stormtrooper had been standing.

The armor was all there was. The body itself had been completely disintegrated.

"I don't believe it," Wyan murmured under his breath. "That blast wasn't that powerful. How could it have destroyed the body so completely?"

"I don't know," Barris said, getting back to his feet. "And for the moment, I don't care. We're getting out of here. Now."

He eased his comlink on, discovered the jamming had finally ceased.

"This is Colonel Barris," he said. "All Imperial troops are to return to the encampment at once and prepare for evacuation."

"Sir?" Wyan murmured, staring out at the forest. "Looks like they found him."

Barris followed his gaze. Emerging into the clearing were the three stormtroopers who'd gone to look for their missing comrade... and they had indeed found him. Or at least, what was left of him.

"The perfect end to a perfect mission," Barris growled. "Come on, Major. Let's get out of here."

Barris had half expected the transport and troop carriers would be attacked as they lifted from the forest and headed for the sky. But no missiles or laser pulses followed them up, and soon they were once again inside the shelter of the Strikefast's hangar bay.

Captain Parck was waiting beside the transport as Barris emerged. "Colonel," he nodded gravely in greeting. "I don't recall giving you permission to leave your position."

"No, sir, you didn't," Barris said, hearing the weariness in his own voice. "But as you yourself pointed out earlier, I was the commander on the scene. I did what I deemed best."

"Yes," Parck murmured. For a moment he continued to look at Barris, then shifted his gaze to the transport itself. It seemed to Barris that his eyes lingered for a moment on the minor blast damage caused by the impossible explosion that had disintegrated that stormtrooper... "Well, what's done is done. I'm told you brought the alien encampment up with you."

"Yes, sir," Barris said, frowning slightly as he tried to read his commander's expression. He would have expected Parck to be angry, or at least pointedly dissatisfied with the troopers' performance. But instead, he seemed merely thoughtful. "Do you want me to have the techs get back to work on it?"

"There's no hurry," Parck said. "For now, everyone is to report to debriefing. Those smuggler attacks were far too effective; I want to know everything about what happened down there." He brought his gaze hard onto Barris. "As for you, Colonel, I want you to accompany me back to my office."

So he was going to drop the hammer on Barris in private. A small favor, at least. "Yes, sir," Barris sighed.

They left the hangar bay; but to Barris's surprise they didn't go to Parck's office. Instead, the captain led the way up to the hangar bay control tower, the lights of which had been inexplicably darkened. "Sir?" Barris asked as Parck stepped to the observation window.

"An experiment, Colonel," Parck said, gesturing to the man at the control board. "All right, dim the lights in the hangar bay."

Barris stepped to Parck's side as the lights outside the observation window faded to nighttime levels. The transport and troop carriers they'd just left were prominently visible directly below; beyond them at the other end of the bay were three Kappa-class shuttles and a Harbinger courier ship. No one was in sight anywhere. "What sort of experiment?" Barris asked.

"The testing of a theory, actually," Parck said. "Make yourself comfortable, Colonel. We may be here awhile."

They'd been there nearly two hours when a shadowy figure emerged stealthily from the transport. Silently, it slipped across the darkened hangar bay toward the other ships, taking advantage of the sparse cover along the way.

"Who is that?" Barris asked, straining his eyes to try to penetrate the dim light.

"The source of all your troubles down on the surface, Colonel," Parck said with obvious satisfaction. "Unless I'm mistaken, that's the alien whose home you invaded."

Barris frowned. One alien? One alien? "That's impossible, sir," he protested. "Those attacks could not have been the work of a single alien."

"Well, we'll see if one or two others join him," Parck said. "If not, I would say he was it."

The shadowy figure had moved across the floor to the other ships now. For a moment it paused as if considering. Then, deliberately, it stepped to the door

of the middle Kappa shuttle and slipped inside. "It appears he was indeed alone," Parck said, pulling out a comlink and thumbing it on. "All right, commander, move in. He's in the middle Kappa. Set all weapons for stun: I want him alive and unharmed."

After all the trouble the alien had created for Colonel Barris on the planet surface, Parck had expected him to put up a terrific fight against his captors. To his mild surprise, the other apparently surrendered to the stormtrooper squad without any resistance at all. Perhaps he was taken by surprise. More likely, he knew when resistance was futile.

Which to Parck's mind merely made the creature that much more intriguing. And made the nebulous plan forming in the back of his mind that much more feasible.

The hangar bay lights had been restored to their normal intensity by the time the stormtroopers escorted the alien out of the shuttle, and Parck found himself staring in fascination as the prisoner was brought over to where he and Barris waited. He was generally very Human in size and build, though with some notable differences. He was dressed in what appeared to be skins and furs, apparently made from the indigenous animals from the forest where he'd been living. In the center of a square of armed stormtroopers, he nevertheless had an air of almost regal confidence about him as he walked.

"Look at that," Barris muttered, a note of disgust in his voice as he gestured toward the alien. "Reminds me of those dirty Jawa things on Tatooine. You know- with those-"

"Quiet, Colonel," Parck murmured as the alien and his escort came to a stop in front of him. "Welcome aboard the Victory Star Destroyer Strikefast. Do you speak Basic?"

For a moment the alien seemed to be studying him. "Some," he said.

"Good," Parck said. "I'm Captain Parck, commander of this ship."

Leisurely, the alien let his gaze drift around the hangar bay. Not like a primitive overwhelmed by the size and magnificence of the place, but like another military man sizing up his enemy's strengths. And weaknesses. "I am called Mitth'raw'nuruodo," he said, bringing his eyes back to Parck.

"Mitth'raw'nuruodo," Parck repeated, trying not to mangle the alien word and not succeeding all that well. "First of all, I want you to know that we did not intend to intrude on your privacy down there. We were chasing smugglers, and happened upon your home. One of our standing orders is to study all unknown species we come across."

"Yes," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "So said also the K'rell'n traders who first contacted my people."

Parck frowned. K'rell'n traders? "Must mean Corellians," Barris suggested.

"Ah," Parck nodded. "Of course. I imagine dealing with them is how you learned Basic."

"What do you wish of me?" Mitth'raw'nuruodo asked.

"What do you wish of us?" Parck countered. "You went to a great deal of effort to inveigle your way aboard this ship. What did you hope to accomplish?"

"If you plan to kill me, I would ask that it be done quickly," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said, ignoring the question.

"We don't have to just ask you these questions," Barris put in harshly. "We have drugs and interrogation methods-"

"Enough," Parck said, cutting off Barris's tirade with an upraised hand. "You'll have to excuse Colonel Barris, Mitth'raw'nuruodo. You ran him and his troopers around in concentric rings down there, and he's not at all happy about that."

The alien looked at Barris. "It was necessary."

"Why?" Parck persisted. "What did you hope to accomplish here?"

"To return home."

"You were shipwrecked?"

"I was exiled."

The word seemed to hang in the fume-scented air of the hangar bay. "Why?" Parck asked into the silence.

"The leaders and I disagreed," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said.

Parck snorted under his breath, thinking about some of the louder members of the Imperial Senate. "Yes, we have the same problems with some of our leaders," he told Mitth'raw'nuruodo. "Perhaps we can help each other."

The alien's eyes narrowed slightly. "How?"

"As you see, we have many starships," Parck said, waving a hand around the hangar bay. "There's no reason why we couldn't provide you with what you need to get home."

"In exchange for what?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," Parck said. "First, though, I'd like to know exactly how you were able to outmaneuver all those troopers down there."

"It was not difficult," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said, looking at Barris again. "Your spacecraft crashed near my place of exile, and I had time to examine it before your following troops arrived. The pilot was dead. I took his body and hid it away."

"And filled his flight suit with grass," Barris put in. "Hoping we wouldn't notice you'd taken his comlink."

"And you didn't," the alien reminded him calmly. "More important to me was that you would find the situation intriguing or disturbing, and that you would thus bring the suit and fermented pyussh berries back to your camp."

"Fermented berries?" Barris echoed.

"Yes," the alien said. "When fermented and crushed, pyussh berries are a strong lure for certain small nocturnal animals."

"Which you'd strapped the gimmicked blaster power packs to," Barris said suddenly. "That's how you got them in past our sentry perimeter."

"Yes," the alien said with a short nod of his head. "Also how I attacked the soldiers later. I used a sling to throw more of the berries onto their armor, which then drew the animals to them."

"You also caused a TIE fighter to crash," Parck said. "At least, I presume that was your doing. How did you accomplish that?"

Mitth'raw'nuruodo shrugged fractionally. "I knew the spacecraft would come to search. In preparation I had strung some of my monofilament line between two of the taller treetops. One of the spacecraft hit it."

Parck nodded. And at such low altitude, of course, the pilot wouldn't have had enough time to recover from the sudden impact. "It wouldn't have done you any good to capture the TIE fighter intact, you know," he told the alien. "They're not equipped with hyperdrives."

"I did not expect the spacecraft to survive," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "I wanted the pilot's equipment. And his comlink."

"But you didn't take the comlink," Barris objected. "We checked at the encampment and it was still there."

"No," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "What was there was the comlink from the first pilot."

Parck smiled in spite of himself. So simple, yet so ingenious. "So you switched the comlinks. That way, when we finally discovered the first one was gone and locked it out of the circuit, you still had one that functioned. Very ingenious."

"Very simple," Mitth'raw'nuruodo countered.

"So you killed a TIE pilot for his comlink," Barris said harshly. Clearly, he wasn't nearly as impressed by the alien's resourcefulness as Parck was. "Why did you keep killing my men? For the fun of it?"

"No," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said gravely. "So that soldiers with fuller armor would come."

"With fuller- ?" Barris broke off. "The stormtroopers? You wanted stormtroopers to come?"

"Your soldiers wore helmets," the alien said, tracing an imaginary brim around his forehead. "No good for me." He touched a hand to his face. "I needed armor that would cover my face."

"Of course," Parck nodded. "That was the only way you would be able to enter the encampment undetected."

"Yes," Mitth'raw'nuruodo agreed. "I used an explosive on one first, so that I would have a set of armor to study-"

"Just a minute," Barris interrupted. "How did you do that without anyone hearing the explosion?"

"It came at the same moment I began the communications jamming," the alien said. "Of course no one heard."

"Which you accomplished using the comlink you'd borrowed?" Parck suggested.

"Yes," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "I studied the armor and found a way to kill the soldier inside without noticeable damage. I did so, then walked into the camp and went into the large ship. No one was yet inside. With small branches I had brought I stood the armor upright and put it outside the doorway, with an explosive inside to destroy it."

"So that we wouldn't realize there were actually two missing stormtroopers," Parck nodded again. "Again, ingenious. Finally, then, where did you hide during the ride up?"

"Inside the second power generator casing," Mitth'raw'nuruodo told him. "It is nearly empty- I have been using it for parts to keep the first running."

Parck cocked an eyebrow at him. "Which implies you've been here for a while. I can see why you wanted so desperately to leave."

Mitth'raw'nuruodo drew himself up to his full height. "I was not desperate. It is necessary that I return to my people."

"Why?" Parck asked.

Again, the alien seemed to study him. "Because they are in danger," he said at last. "There are many dangers in the galaxy."

"Including us?" Barris growled.

The alien didn't flinch. "Yes."

"And how would you help protect your people from these dangers?" Parck said, throwing an annoyed look at Barris.

"They do not accept the concept of- I do not know the word. An attack made against an enemy before he attacks you."

"A preemptive strike," Parck supplied.

"A preemptive strike," Mitth'raw'nuruodo repeated. "I alone of our warrior leaders accept this concept as being within the correct bounds of warfare."

So he'd been a warrior leader, then. Obvious, now, really. "And you think you can now persuade your people to accept this concept?"

"I do not intend to try," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said calmly. "I do not need their permission to fight on their behalf."

"What, all by yourself?" Barris said, his voice half incredulity and half sneer.

Mitth'raw'nuruodo eyed him, and Parck thought he could detect a note of contempt in the alien's face. "If necessary."

"That's very gallant," Parck said. "Also very foolish. And potentially very wasteful."

"You have an alternative to suggest?" the alien countered.

Parck smiled slightly. "You're still studying us, aren't you?" he asked. "Even now, as our prisoner, with little hope of escape, you're studying us."

"Of course," the alien said. "You said it yourselves: you are potential dangers."

"True," Parck said. "On the other hand, how better to neutralize a potential danger than from within it?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Barris's mouth drop open. "Captain, what are you suggesting?"

"I'm offering Mitth'raw'nuruodo the chance at a position within the Fleet, Colonel," Parck said, watching the alien's face closely. There was no surprise there, no change of expression at all. Perhaps he was too shocked to react. More likely he'd already anticipated the offer. Perhaps had even deliberately maneuvered the conversation this direction. "Emperor Palpatine has many enemies," Parck continued. "The resistance groups sprouting up show that much. A warrior leader of Mitth'raw'nuruodo's skills would be a valuable asset to us."

"But he's an-" Barris broke off his sentence with a hiss.

"An alien?" Parck finished for him. "Yes, he is. But sometimes that doesn't make a difference."

"It does with Palpatine," Barris said harshly.

"Not always." Parck lifted his eyebrows slightly. "I'm willing to risk it, Mitth'raw'nuruodo. How about you?"

"The benefit to you is clear," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "What would be the benefit to me?"

"Access to the Fleet's files on aliens here at the Outer Rim, for one thing," Parck said. "A chance to use your skills to seek out and neutralize threats to your people that might exist within the boundaries of the Empire."

He shrugged. "And who knows? Perhaps the Emperor would be willing to send you back here with a force strong enough to neutralize those other

threats to your people that you mentioned. After all, a threat to your people would also be a potential threat to the Empire."

Mitth'raw'nuruodo's eyes flicked to Barris. "And if I am not acceptable to your people?"

"Then I give you my personal promise that I'll take you wherever you wish to go," Parck said.

"Sir, I strongly suggest you reconsider this," Barris said, his voice soft but urgent. "The Emperor will never accept this- this creature."

Parck smiled to himself. No, the Emperor did not in general think very highly of non-Humans... but there were some net secret exceptions. Such as the aliens Darth Vader had discovered on a ruined world and recruited into private service to Palpatine. The commander of Vader's ship on that mission- a cousin of Parck's and a former rival at the Academy- had been promoted to Vice Admiral for his part in that encounter.

Maybe Parck had finally found a way to match him. Or even to pass him up. "Have we an agreement?"

"The risk is worth taking," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "I will come speak with your Emperor."

Parck smiled, a warm sense of satisfaction flowing through him. He had his prize now, all right. A far better prize than the petty and totally insignificant smuggler still hiding on the planet below. "Excellent," he said. "We'll leave at once. One warning, though: you're almost certainly going to have to change your name. 'Mitth'raw'nuruodo' is far too hard for the average Fleet officer to pronounce."

"Of course," the alien said, smiling. He looked at Barris, those glowing red eyes- as Barris had pointed out, so reminiscent of a Jawa's - glittering in deep contrast to the darkness of his blue skin and blue-black hair. "Perhaps my core name would be easier for the average Fleet officer. Call me Thrawn."

"Thrawn it is, then," Parck nodded. "And now, perhaps you'll accompany me to the bridge. Your Imperial orientation might as well begin now."

From the mouth of the cave, Llollulion warbled urgently. "What are you talking about?" Terrik demanded, coming up beside him. "They're not going to give up now."

The Borlovian warbled again, handing over the macrobinoculars. Muttering under his breath, Terrik jammed them against his eyes and peered upward.

Just in time to see the Star Destroyer flicker with pseudomotion as it made the jump to lightspeed.

"Well, I'll be," he mumbled, lowering the macrobinoculars in disbelief. A sudden thought struck him, and he lifted them again, searching the sky from horizon to horizon. But there were no other ships in sight that might have come here to take over the search. Unless they were lying in ambush on the other side of the planet.

Terrik grinned. If they were skulking in wait around the horizon hoping to draw him out, they were in for a rude surprise. The Starwayman might be old and battered, but given a halfway decent head start she could outpace most anything out there. "Go fire up the converters," he ordered Llollulion. "We're getting out of here."

The Borlovian warbled acknowledgment and headed into the cave. Terrik gave the sky one last check; and then, almost unwillingly, found himself gazing across the forest toward where the encampment had been.

Could something about that place have been the reason the Star Destroyer had left so suddenly? Terrik couldn't imagine how or why that might happen, but the connection seemed inescapable.

Still, it hardly mattered. Terrik had a cargo to deliver, and for whatever reason he now had a clear shot to do so. And whatever might have happened out there-

Looping the macrobinoculars around his neck, he turned and headed back to the cave. Whatever happened out there, it certainly had nothing to do with him.

Ghosts of the Sith

This interlude takes place between book #2, Dark Warning, and #3, Underworld.

The starcruiser lurched as Ferus Olin yanked it to starboard. The debris field was studded with jettisoned space garbage and small asteroids that could get sucked into your engine faster than you could say, Oops. He could handle it. If only his hands would stop sweating.

Korriban, the seat of power for the ancient Sith order, lay behind the debris field. A source of evil that still calls evil to meet it, Obi-Wan Kenobi had once said. As Ferus's ship approached its inner atmosphere, he could feel the dark side of the Force rising around him.

Ferus had made the choice to come, had entered the co-ordinates into the nav computer - yet it had felt as though the decisions were being made outside of his own will. It was as though a tractor beam had got a hold of him, yanking him forward.

Why am I doing this? Why?

It made no sense, except in his bones.

Just days before, Obi-Wan had hiked up a mountaintop on Bellassa to track him down. Ferus had been your average, run-of-the-mill Clone Wars veteran/resistance fighter/Imperial prison escapee. Then Obi-Wan had shown up, and soon he was dodging bounty hunters and finding himself smack in the middle of civil wars, not to mention finding out that the galaxy was in the hands of the Sith.

Now here he was, a Jedi again. And Obi-Wan had toddled off to retire among the banthas on Tatooine.

He wasn't even a Jedi. Not really. He'd been Siri Tachi's apprentice when he'd left the Jedi order. He could feel the Force, but accessing it with the same swiftness, the same pureness, was a struggle.

He had been on his way to Coruscant from the Outer Rim to check out a rumour about imprisoned Jedi when the idea had occurred to him to use Korriban for a fuel stop.

He never said he'd been a smart Jedi.

Something had called him. An urge to test himself, maybe. He needed to see what he was up against. Even a glimpse of the dark side on Korriban would tell him more than Obi-Wan's words ever could.

He passed through the debris field and suddenly Korriban was there, crimson clouds obscuring its surface, seven moons the colour of bleached bone. He'd been here before as an apprentice. He remembered the feeling in his stomach, a kind of too-sweet sickness, like rotten fruit, in his mouth.

His 13-year-old traveling companion, Trever Flume, came up behind him. "Spooky. Those clouds..."

"The colour of blood."

"The colour of pain," Trever said.

Ferus glanced at him. Trever had seen much in his short life. The Imperials had killed his entire family. If pain could have a colour, Trever would know it.

They were cleared to land at Dreshdae. The spaceport lay in the centre of a plateau, just a huddle of ugly buildings under a metallic sky. Ferus eased the ship down to the landing platform, coming in low and easy.

"Can we review now, o' brave leader?" Trever asked. "According to you and the 'Wan, the Sith are the ultimate bad guys with awesome evil-doing power. And you want to refuel at their own private pit stop?"

"That about covers it." Ferus grinned. "We won't stay long."

Trever raked back his blue hair with one hand. "We've already stayed too long," he muttered.

Outside, an Imperial officer was already waiting.

"No access to Dreshdae. Emergency fuelling only. Stay by your ship."

"Charming welcome," Trever said as the officer walked away.

Ferus took in everything without seeming to, an old Jedi technique. The landing platform and hangar had been expanded recently - he could see the new ferrocrete laid in slabs next to the old, done hastily with humps and bumps and already cracked and scorched from the amount of traffic. The hangar was thick with Imperial traffic and battered star cruisers. Grungy pilots leaned against their ships, and Imperial officers hurried by importantly. Battle droids were everywhere. He'd thought most of them were out of service now.

He felt as though something brushed his shoulder, but there was no one there. Perspiration sprang upon his skin, rolled down between his shoulder blades. The dark side of the Force was so powerful here that it seemed to hang in the air like dank humidity. He remembered that feeling, too. And the voices.

At first they were so low, you thought it was a breeze, until you noticed there was no breeze. And the words weren't coming from the beings around him. They were inside him, insistent and soft, like damp fingertips caressing him.

The ghosts of the Sith were whispering in his ear, picking up his own fears, adding their own dark invitations.

You think you've lost the Force, but we can teach you. You'll be better than before. You've lost everything; we'll get it back for you. We can get you everything back... everything you had, and everything you want... just stay and join us....

"Ferus? You okay?"

"Fine."

The voices were bad enough. Now Ferus noticed the peculiar quality of sound in the hangar. Was it the design of the landing strips, the docking bays, or the low overhangs that made voices echo? Whatever it was, it gave the sound a hallucinatory quality. Footsteps you thought were approaching were actually receding. Voices you thought were behind you really came from up ahead. A landspeeder you thought would appear around a corner never arrived.

So when the voice came from behind him, but she appeared in front of him, he was surprised.

The woman surveyed the landing platform with a chilly blue gaze. Then she flung a luxurious chaughaine cape around her shoulders and stalked in his direction, followed by a high-ranking Imperial officer.

Ferus reached back casually and drew his hood over his head, shadowing his face.

"Take me immediately to the Valley of the Dark Lords," she said to the officer as she passed them.

"You know her?" Trever asked.

"Jenna Zan Arbor. The most-wanted galactic criminal before the Clone Wars. A brilliant scientist who developed cures for diseases that would decimate populations."

"That's good."

"Then she would introduce the virus into the population, killing thousands, before stepping in to save them. In the meantime, she would jack up the price."

"That's bad."

"You're catching on. She was obsessed with studying the Force. She might be one of the few in the galaxy who knows that Palpatine is a Sith. On my last mission, we tracked her here. She came to meet a Dark Lord. I wonder why she's here."

"Not our problem. We're headed to Coruscant, remember?"

"If we followed her..."

"We're not supposed to leave the ship. Normally I don't like obeying orders, but in this case... gladly." Trever shivered as he looked over the lip of the platform, down at Dreshdae.

Stay. We have things to teach you.

He wanted to stay. He could outwit the voices. They would think he was staying for them, for their powers, but he would stay only for his own reasons.

You can become stronger in the Force. This is the place to do it. You know it.

Ferus felt the urge inside, strong as the pull of a gigantic moon. He could learn from them and yet not surrender to the dark side. They were right - he was weak now, and he needed to be strong. He could stay.

"Ferus!" Trever put a hand on his wrist.

He looked down, and did not see the genial, wounded boy he was fond of. He saw an obstacle.

Good, good, you're learning.

He stared down at Trever's hand. He felt the warmth of skin on skin. A touch, one being to another. And in that touch he felt trust.

"I just think..." Trever said, "that at this point, we need to choose our battles."

With an effort, Ferus pushed against the voices. The dark side was here, but so was the Force he knew. He felt it around him and grabbed on.

Twenty metres ahead, Zan Arbor suddenly turned. He wasn't sure what had prompted her movement. Her blue gaze was intense as she studied him. He didn't move.

She said something to the officer next to her.

"We'd better go," Ferus said.

Without any appearance of haste, they turned and jumped into their cruiser.

He keyed in the request for clearance and counted off the seconds. It seemed to take years. In that span of time he realised how close he had come to staying. He had barely fought off that urge. They had found his weakness and exploited it.

The light flashed green. Departure Granted.

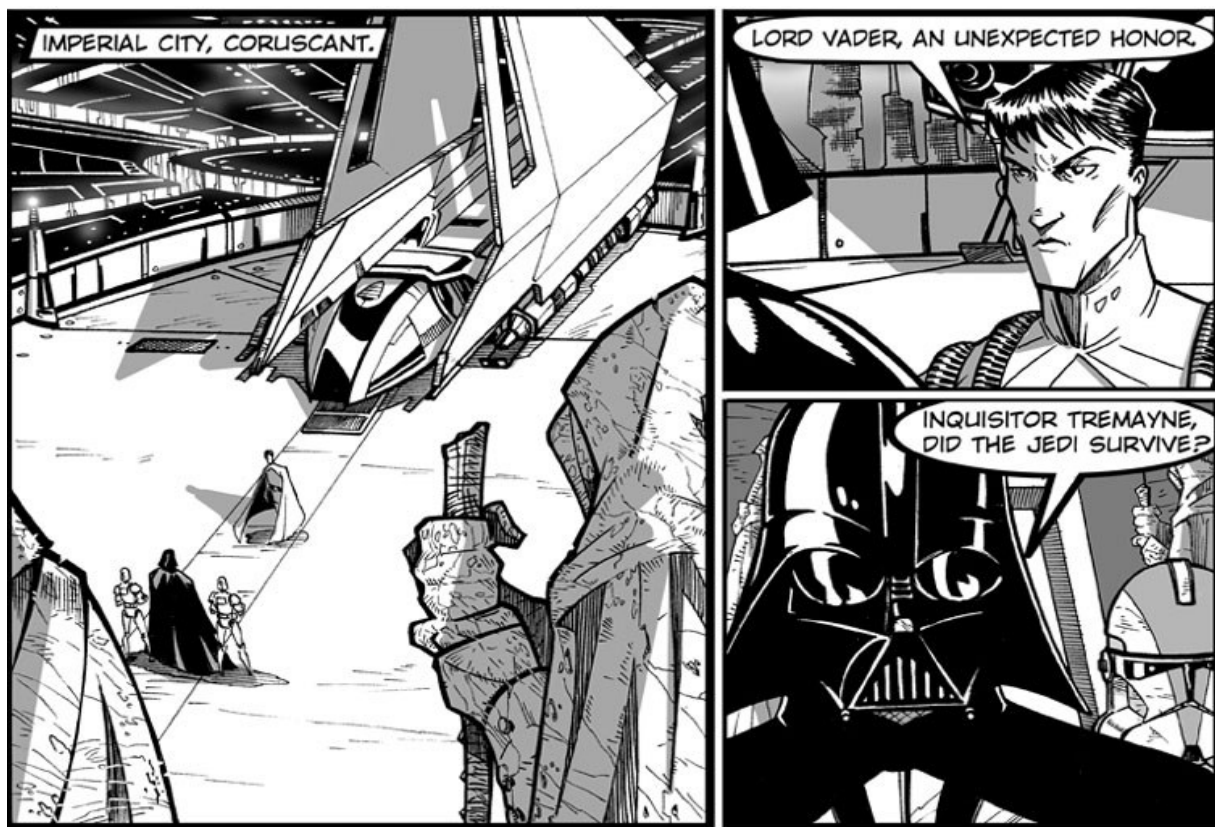
The light flashed yellow and the screen was blinking Contact Ground Control as he fired the engines.

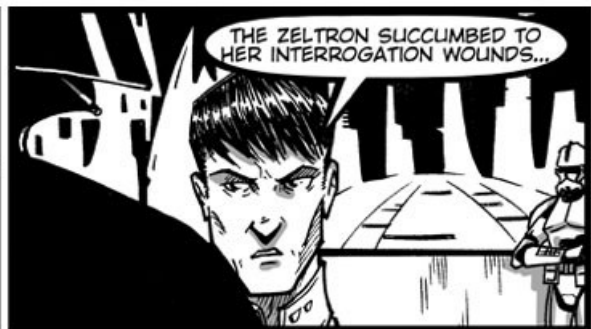
Ignoring the summons, Ferus took off.

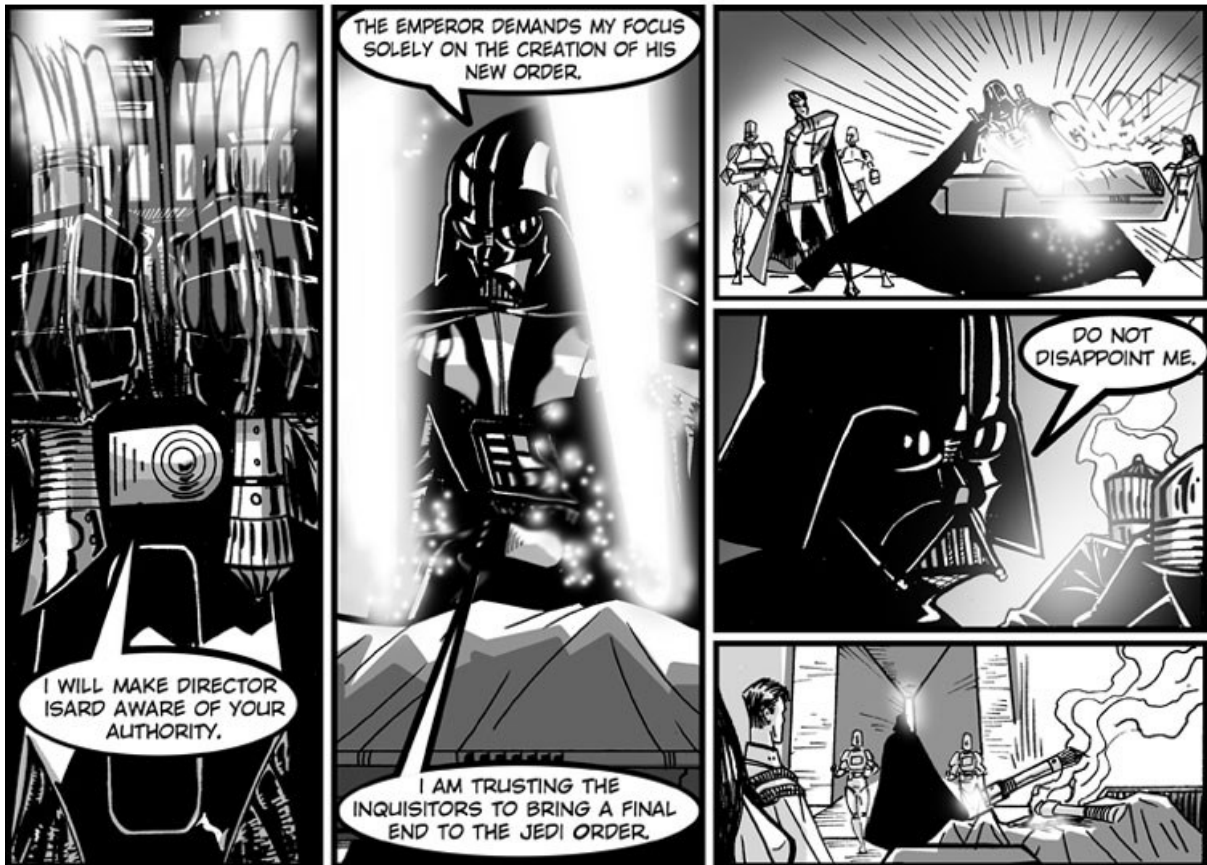
Korriban had taught him something. He wasn't strong enough to take on the Sith. He wasn't ready.

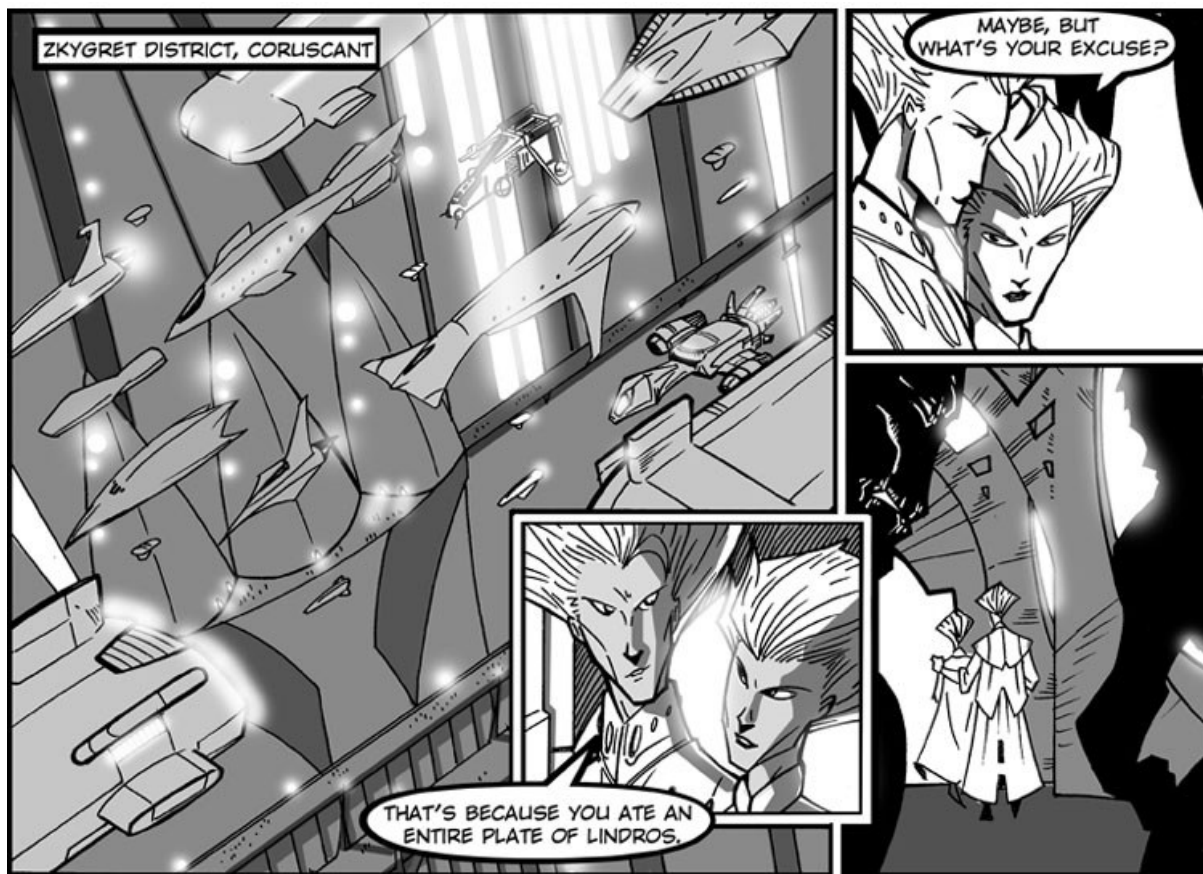
Yet he was on his way.

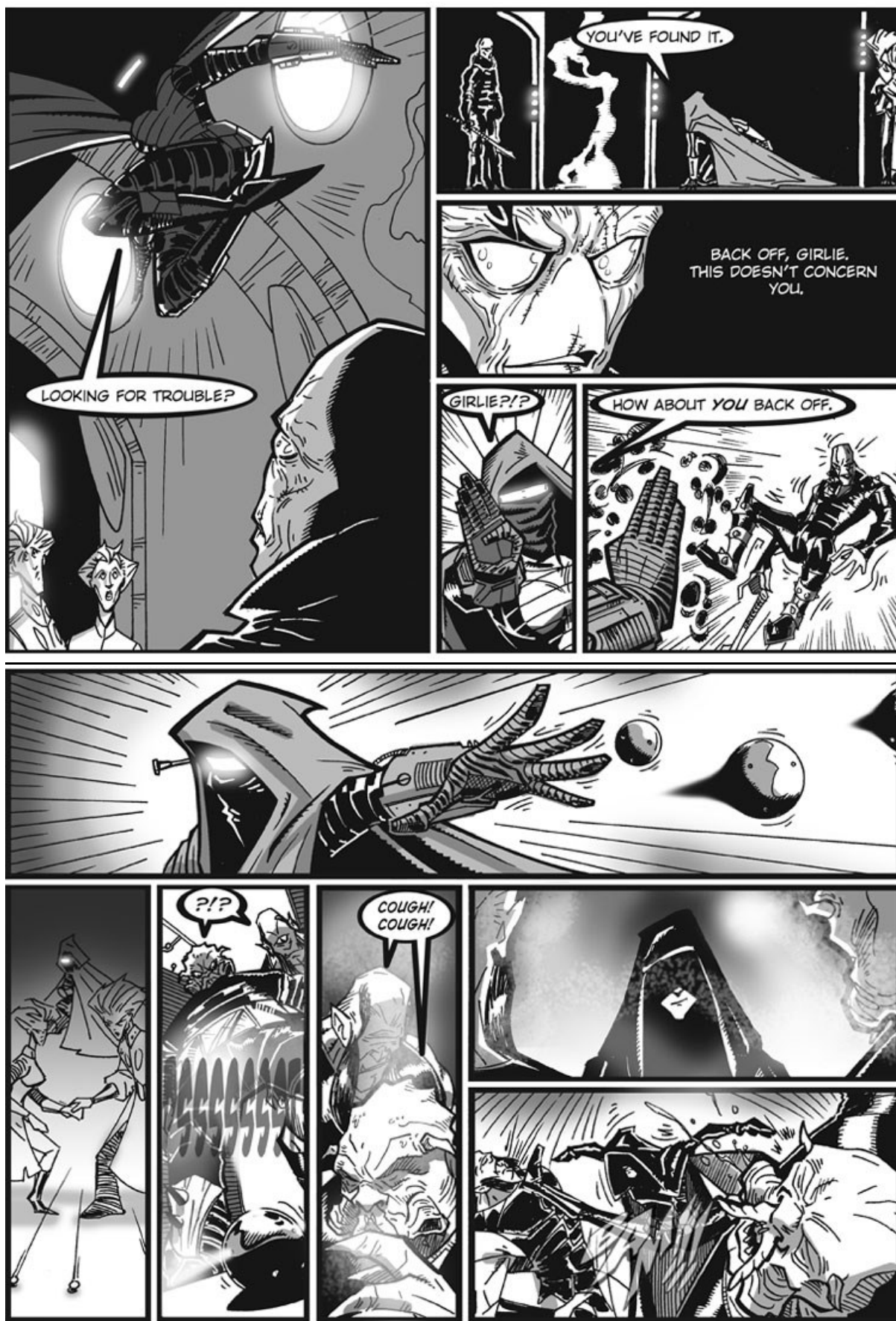
Evasive Action: Prey



















WHY ARE YOU
LOOKING FOR
THAT BOY?



HE'S CUTE.



WHO ARE YOU? YOU
CAN'T HAVE SECURITY
CLEARANCE TO BE HERE...



I'M YSANNE AND THAT'S
MY DAD. HE'S IN CHARGE
OF THIS PLACE.



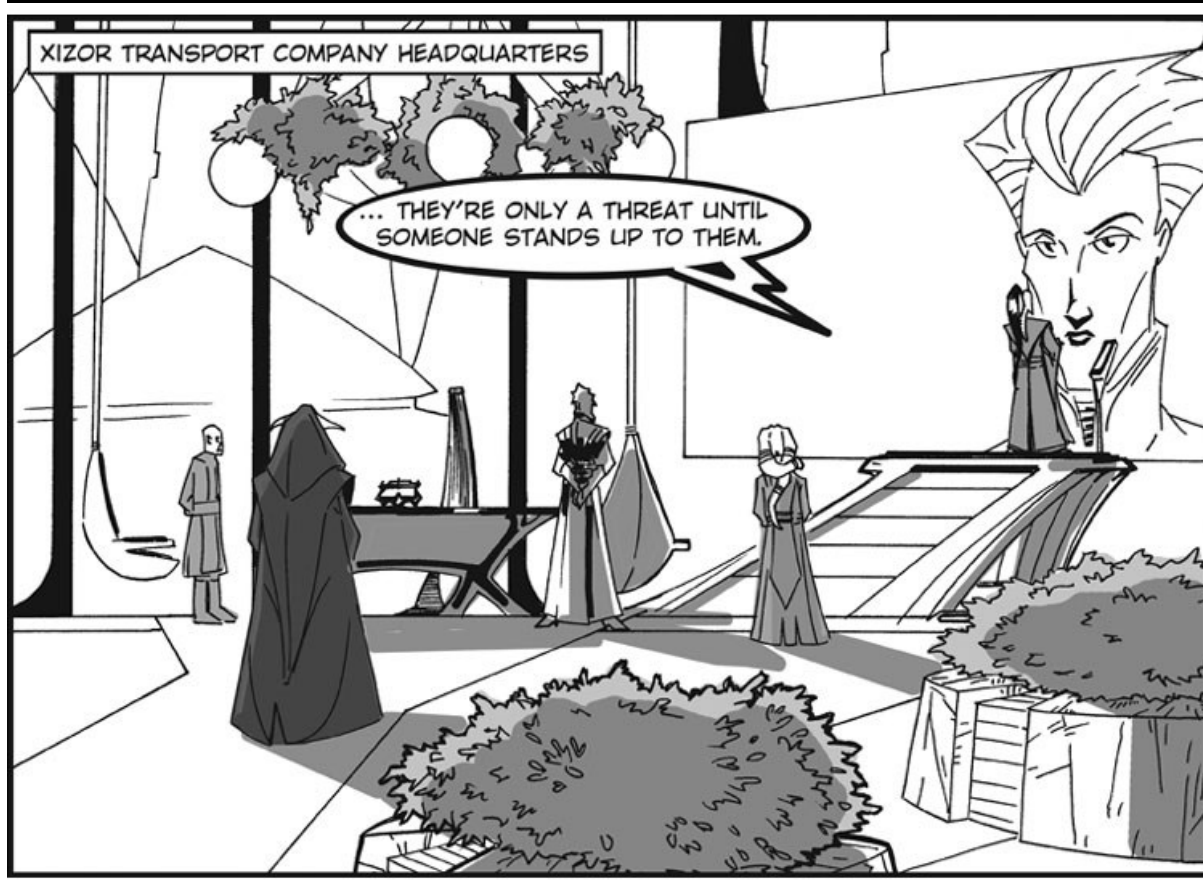
I ASSURE YOU,
YOUR FATHER IS *NOT*
IN CHARGE.



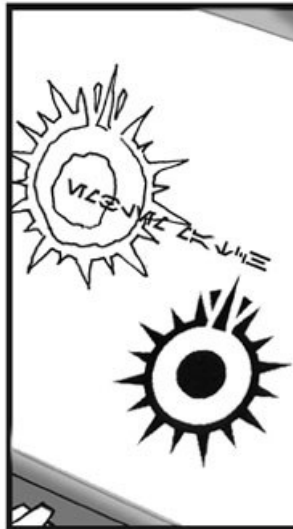
TREMAINE, I
HAVE SOMETHING...

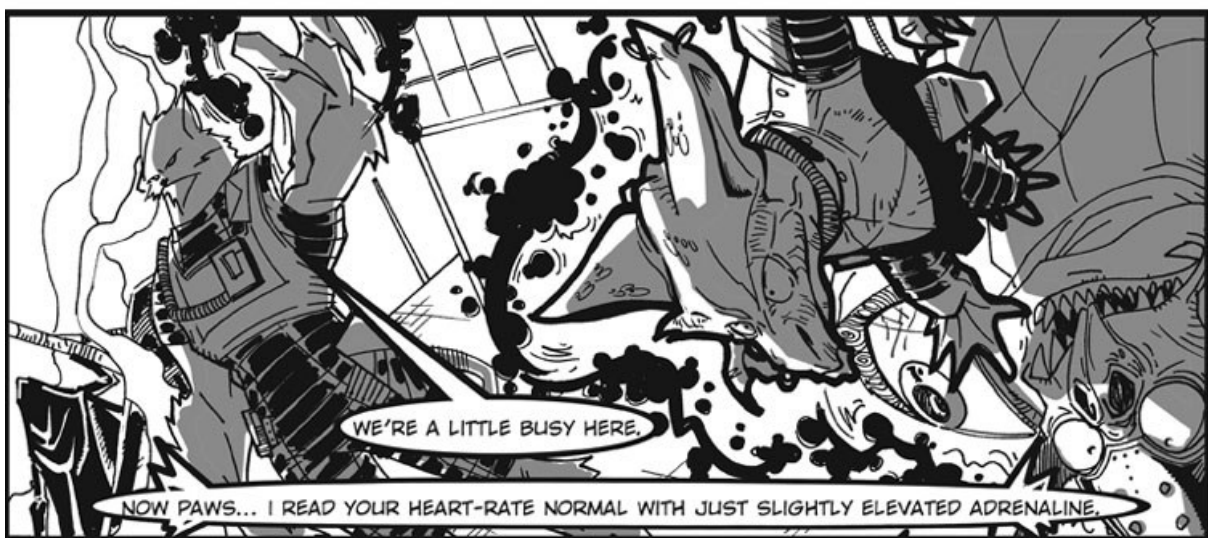


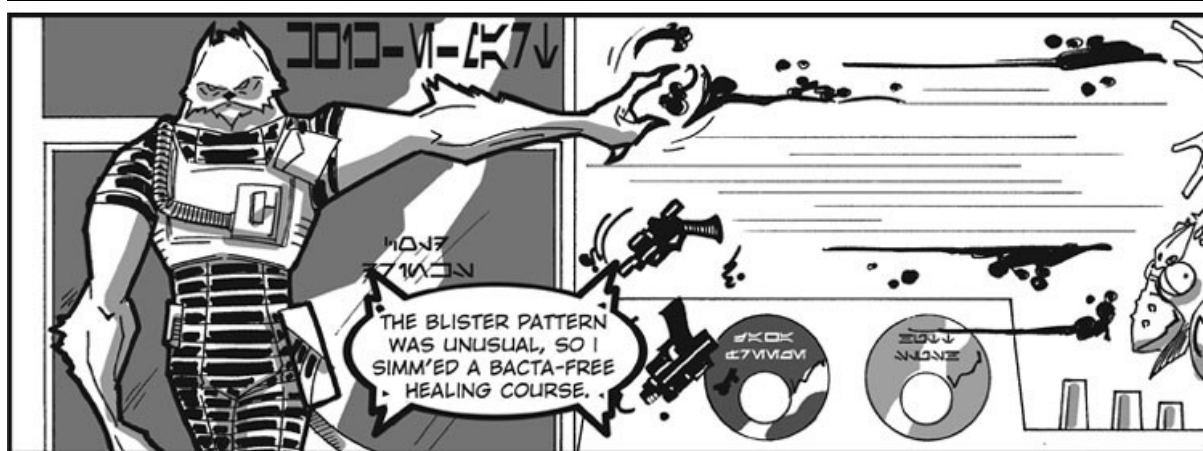
IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, DIRECTOR.
I'LL LET YOU KNOW IF I NEED
ANYTHING ELSE.

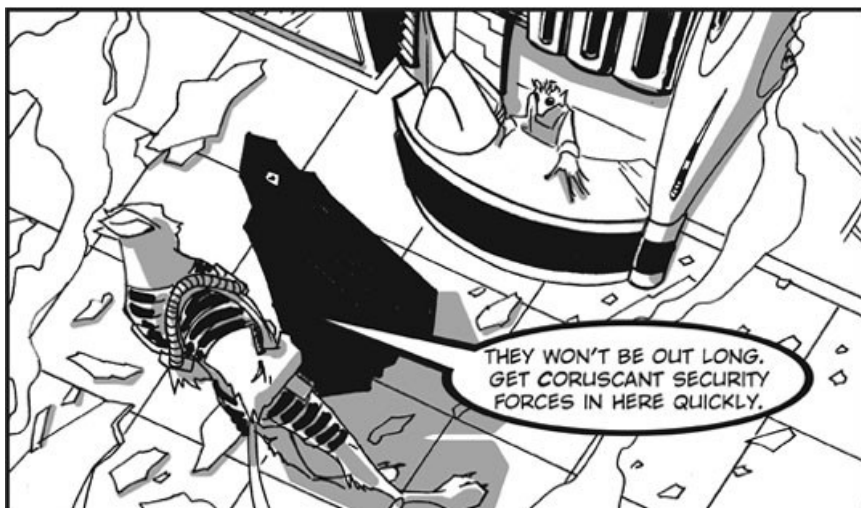












THEY WON'T BE OUT LONG.
GET CORUSCANT SECURITY
FORCES IN HERE QUICKLY.



WE MAY HAVE
INTERRUPTED THE
DELIVERY OF BLACK SUN'S
MESSAGE. THEY PROBABLY
WANT TO FINISH
THE JOB.



BLUE, GET US A LOCATION.
WE'LL GO WARN THE OMWATI.



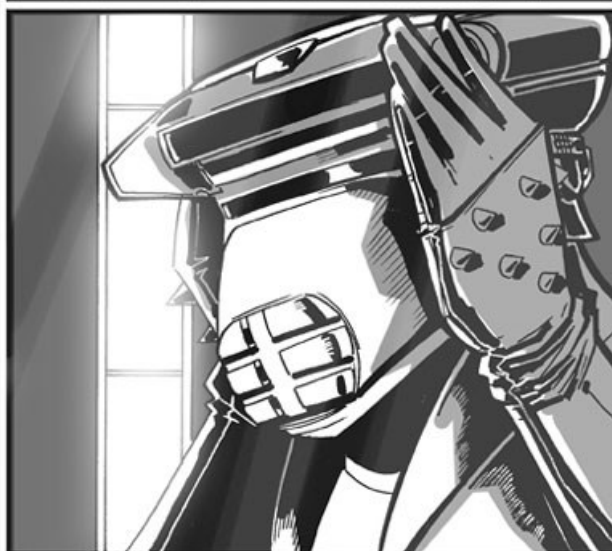
TAKE CARE, MART-MATE.
OK IF I TAKE THIS FIZZY-BIP?

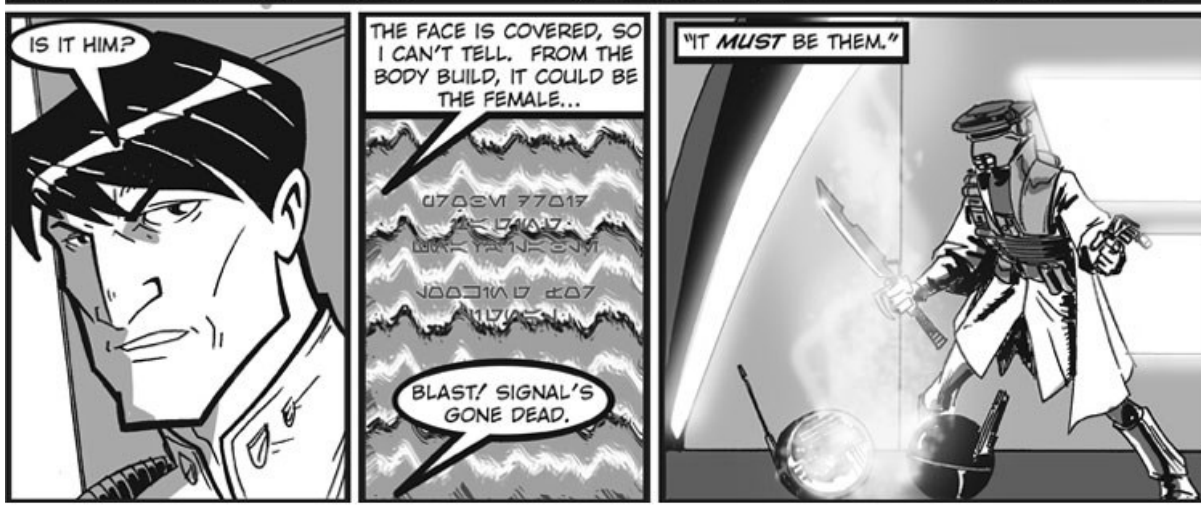


IT'S KODO AND ALEEMA FINN.
662 GASGOR VALLEY, SUITE 5858.

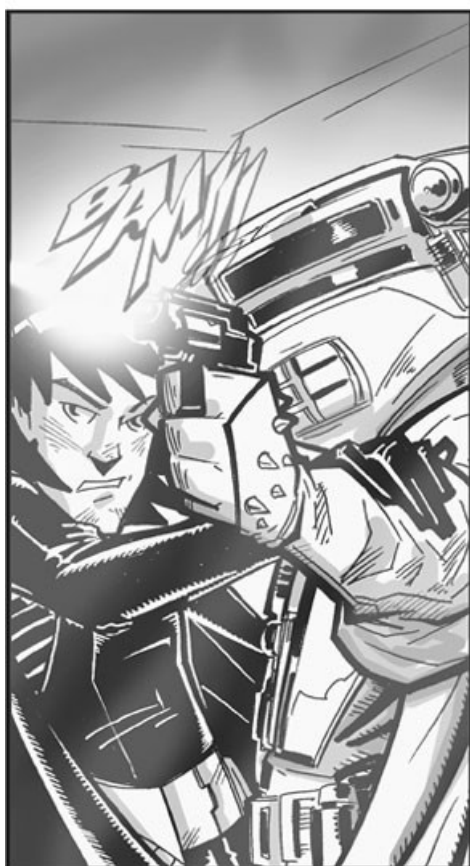


HRM.

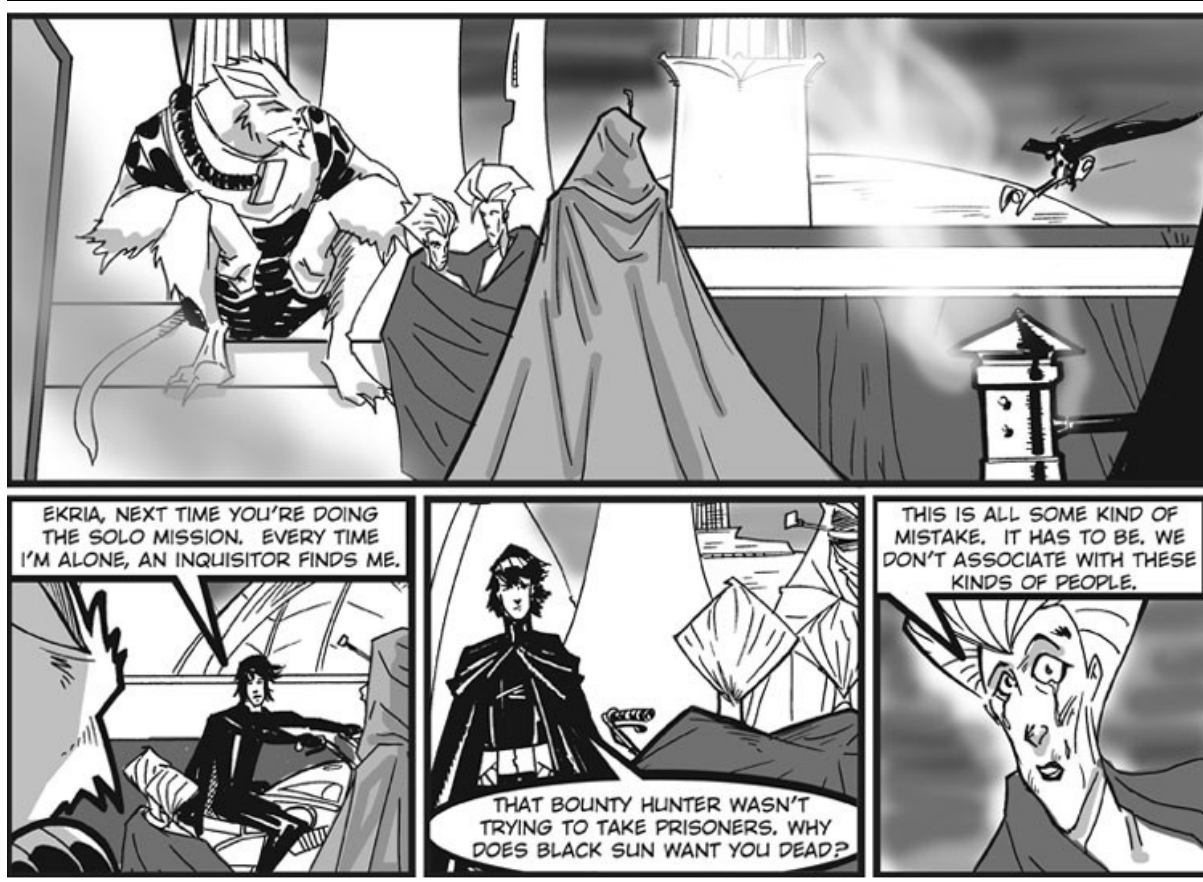




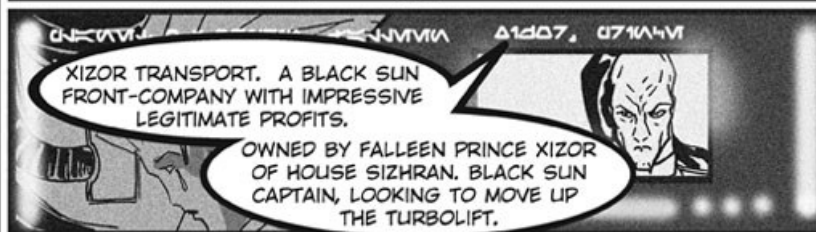


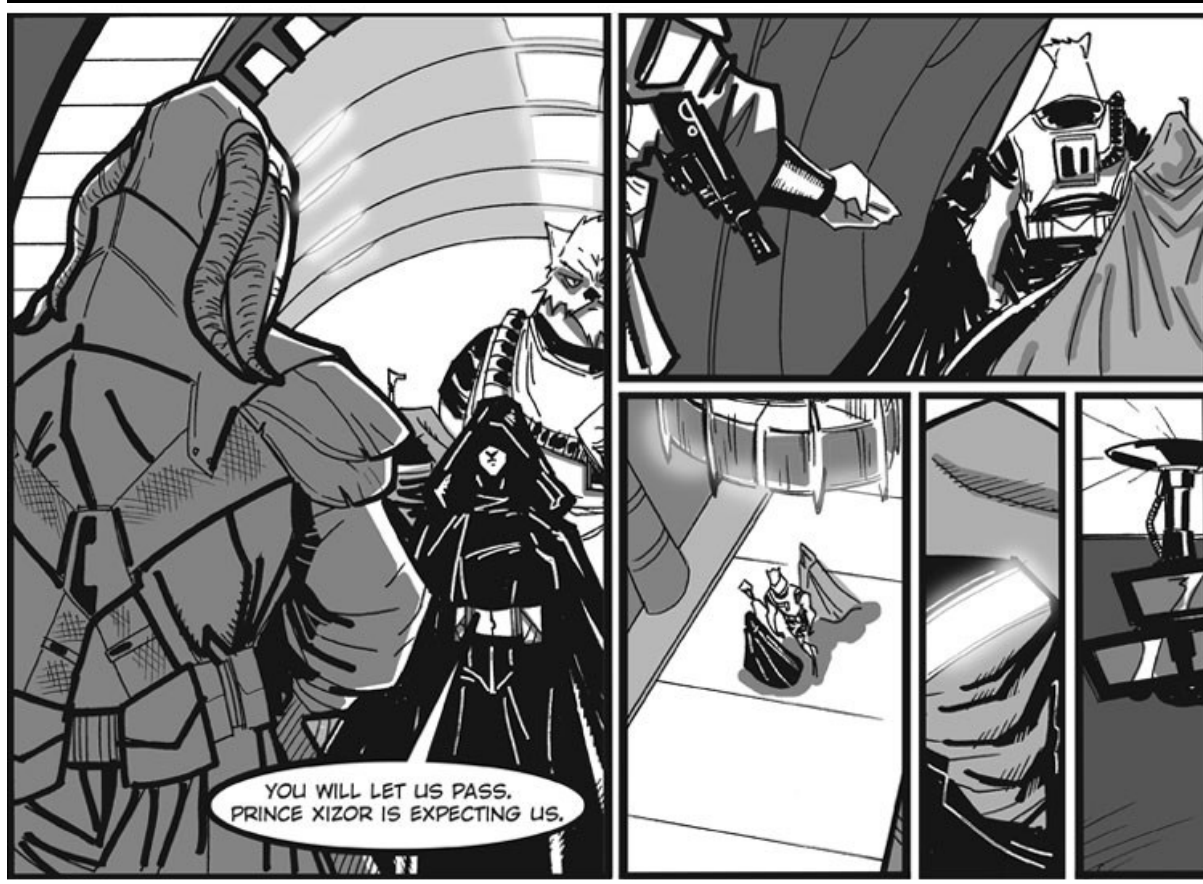
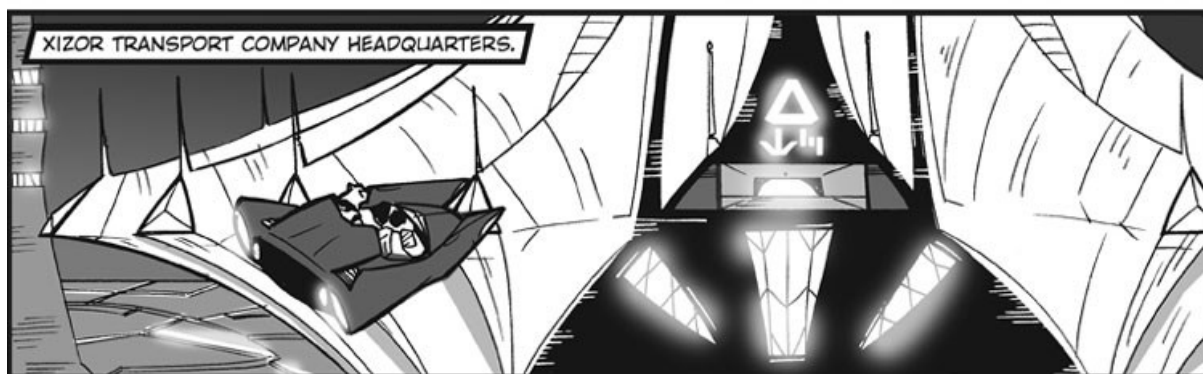




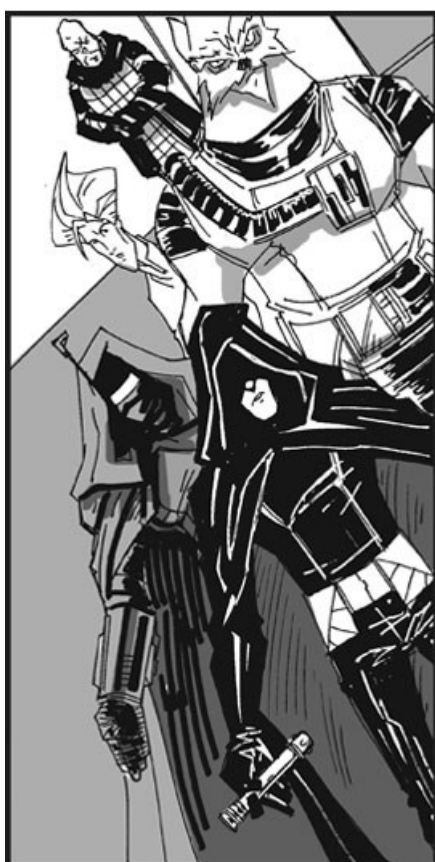


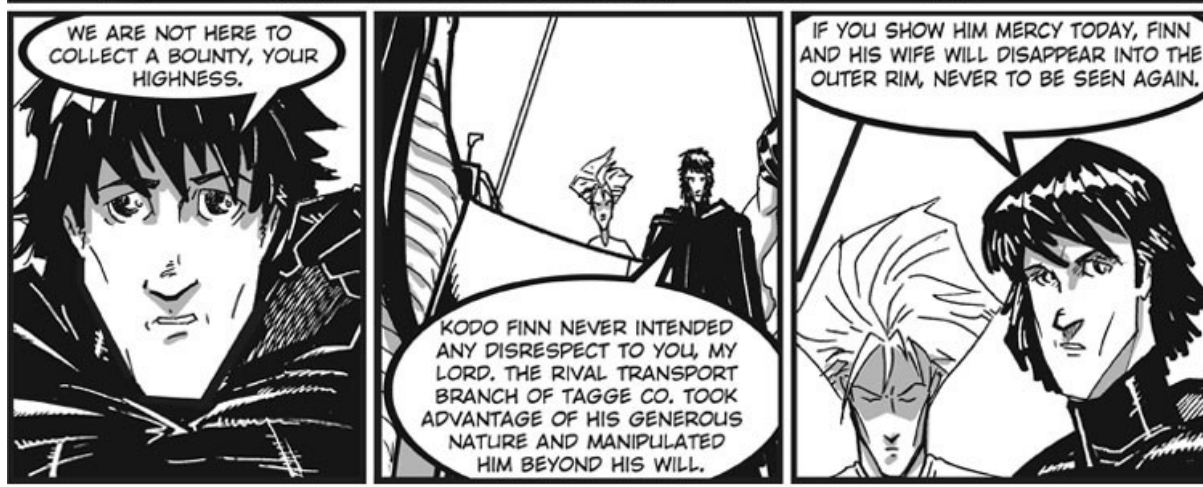
















TEE HEE-HEE



HEE-HEE



LANU!

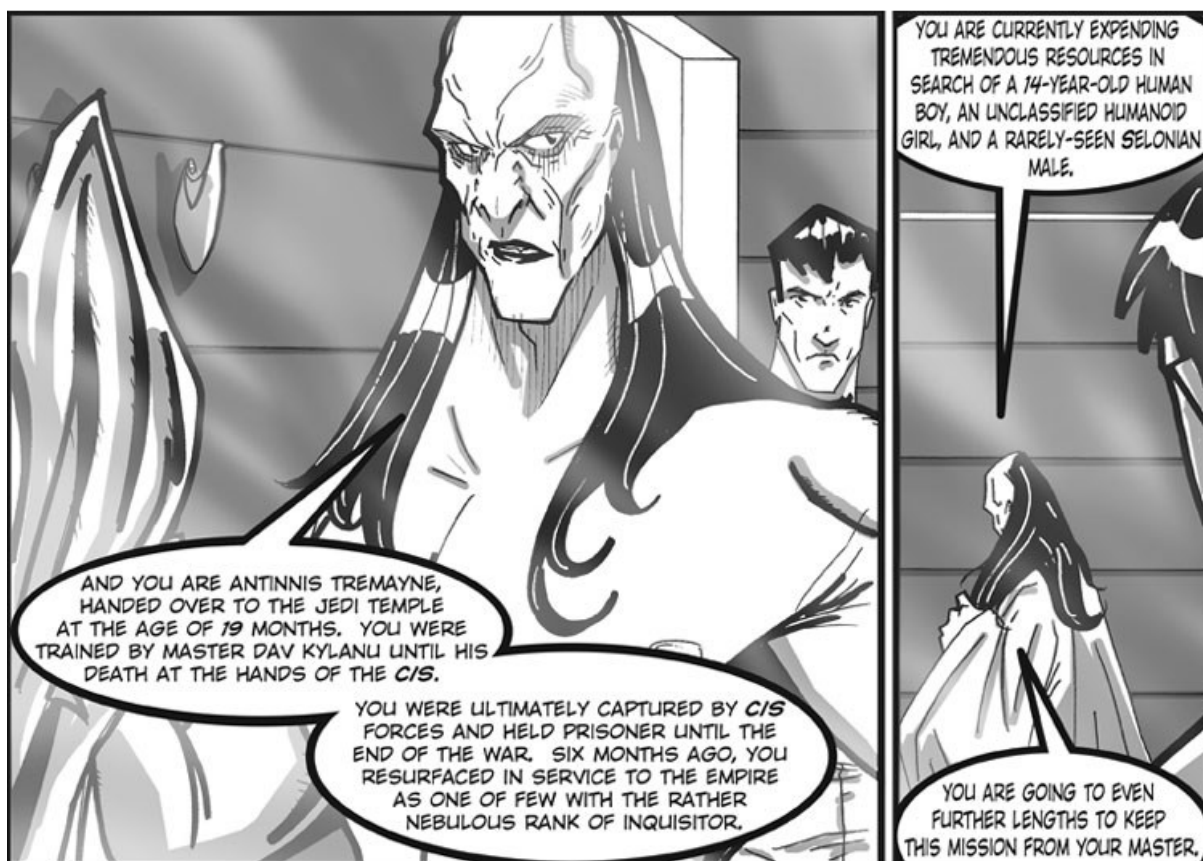
DON'T BE UPSET WITH INQUISITOR PASIQ.



SHE WAS MERELY KEEPING ME COMPANY WHILE I WAITED FOR YOU.



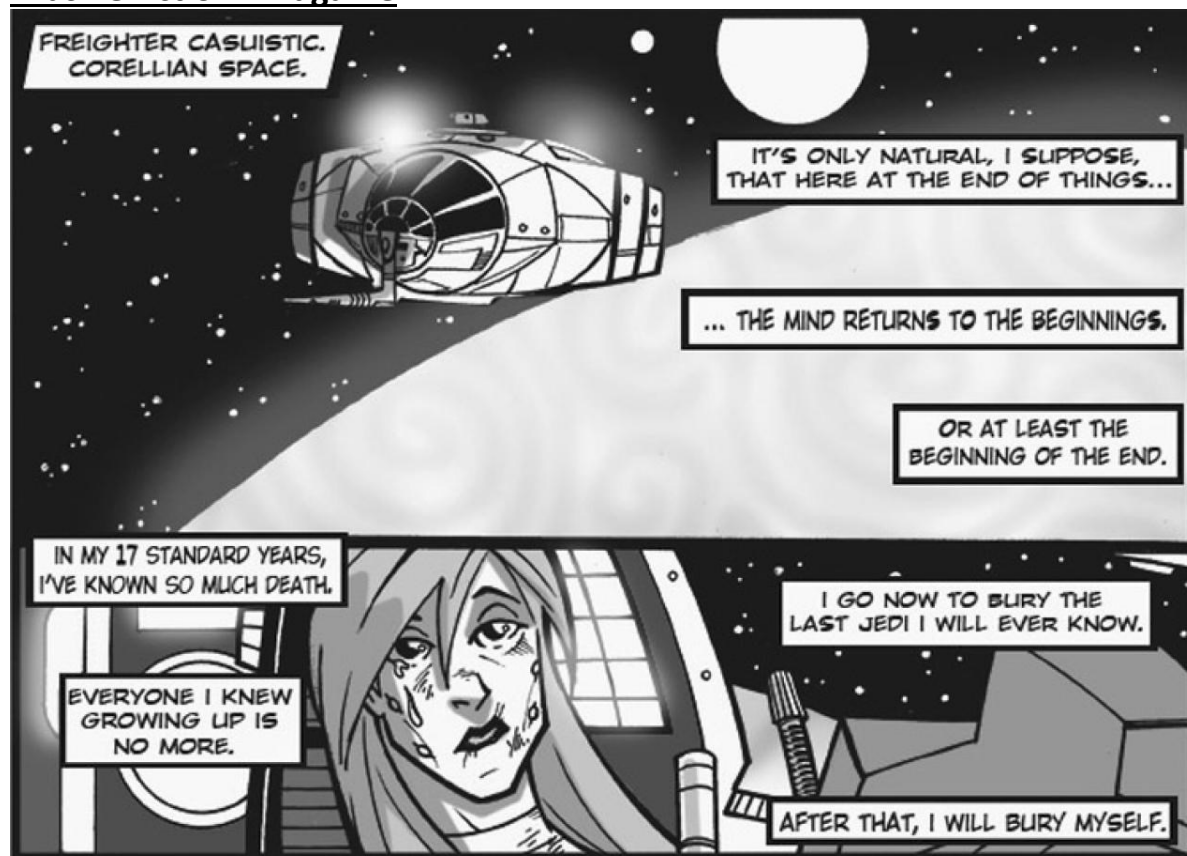
I DO NOT MEAN TO BE RUDE. ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF. I AM PRINCE XIZOR OF HOUSE SIZHRAN.







Evasive Action: Endgame

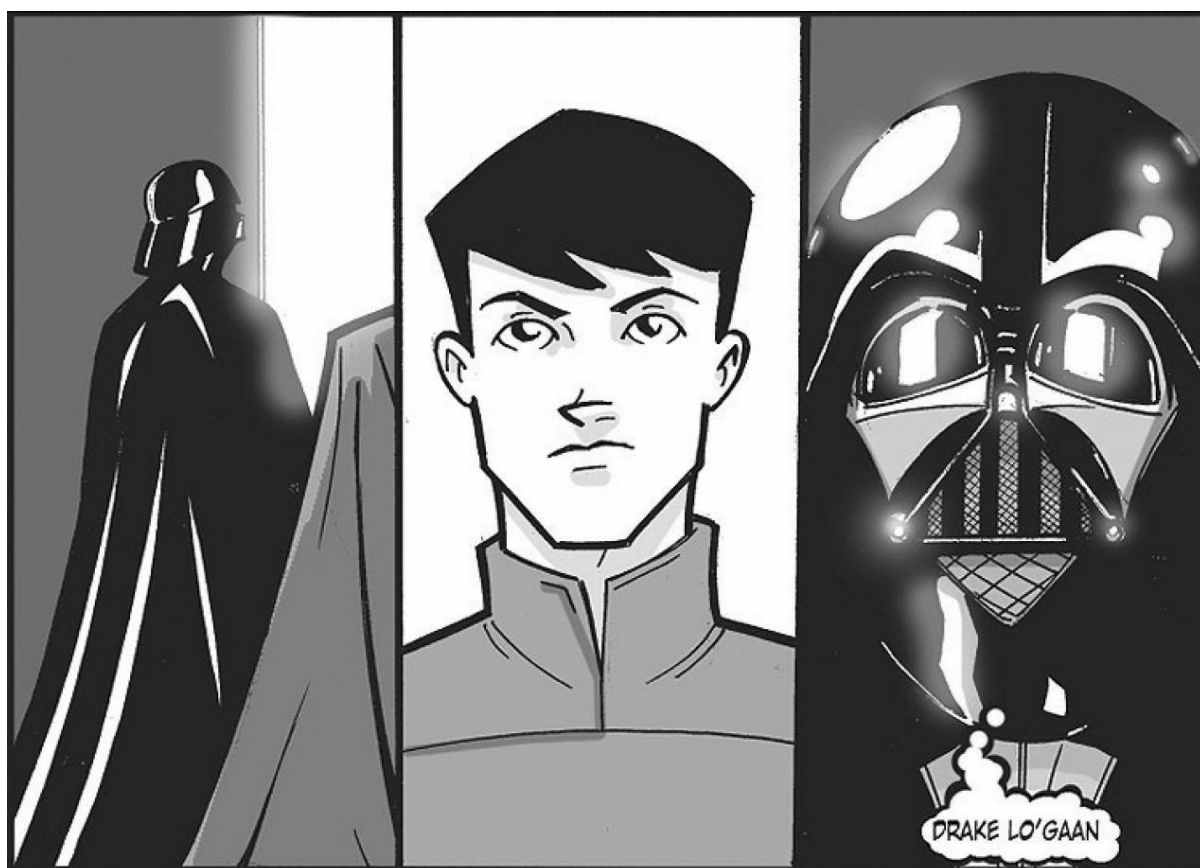


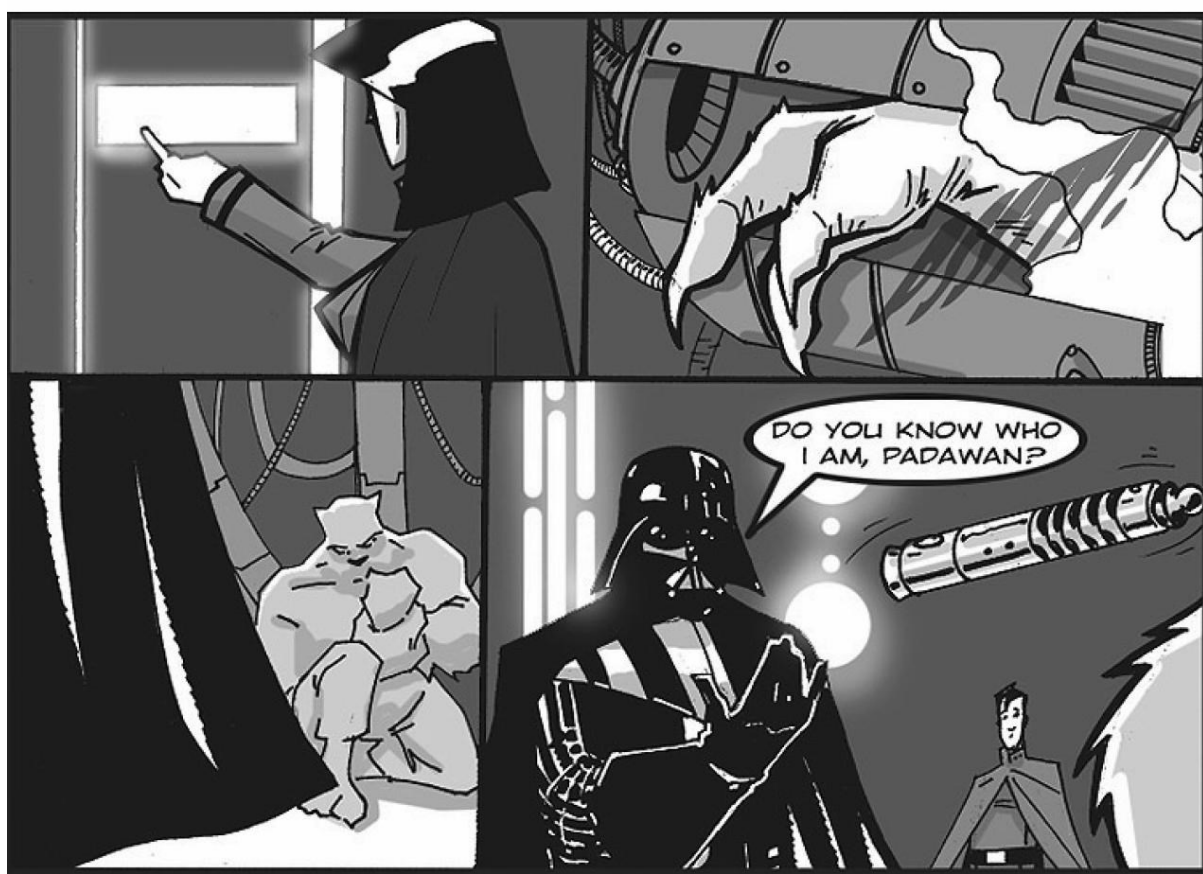


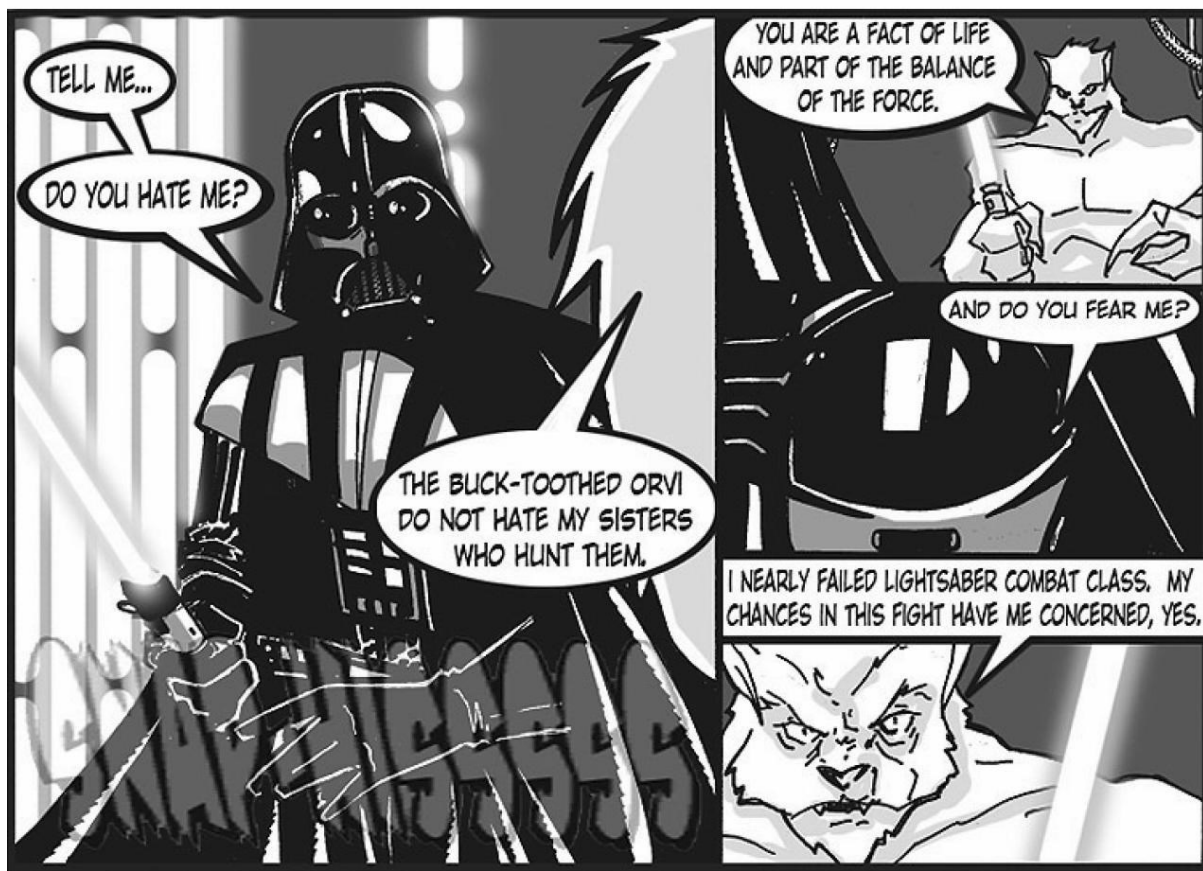




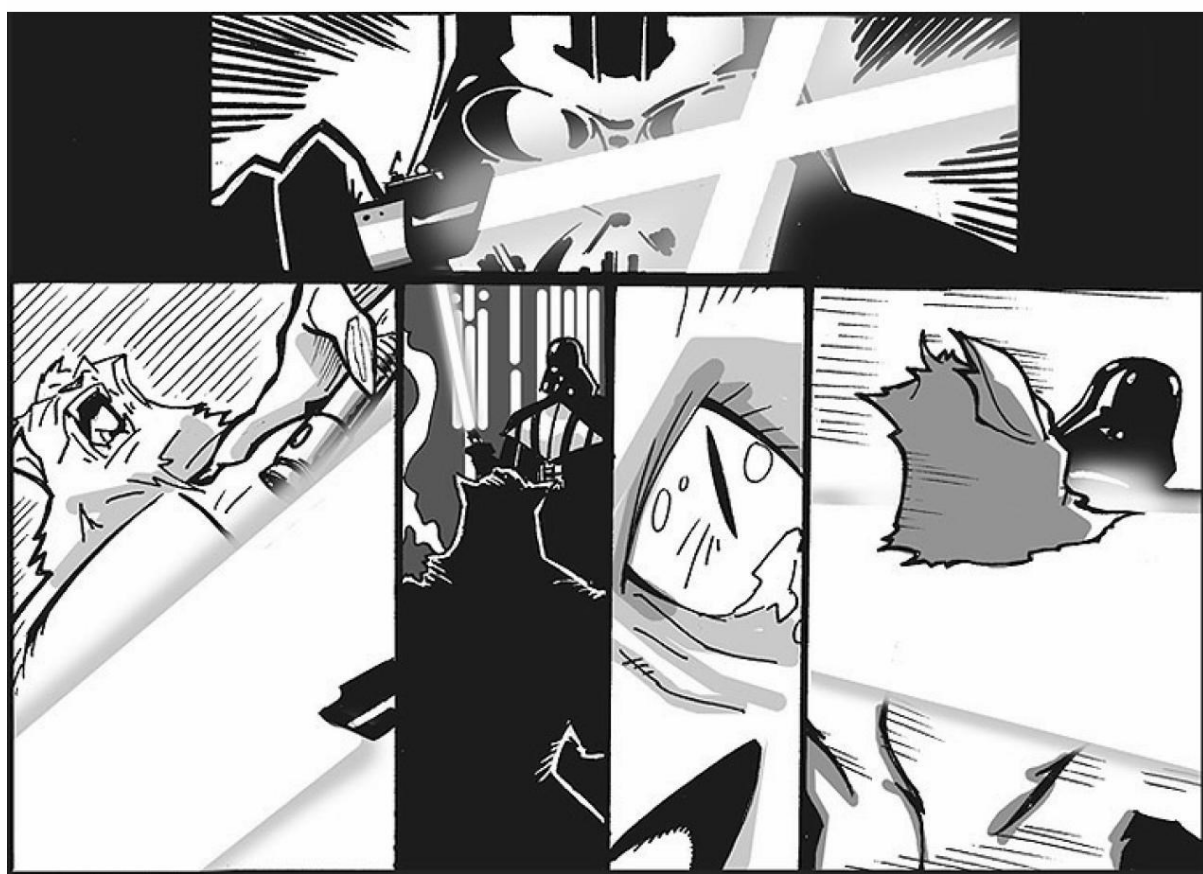


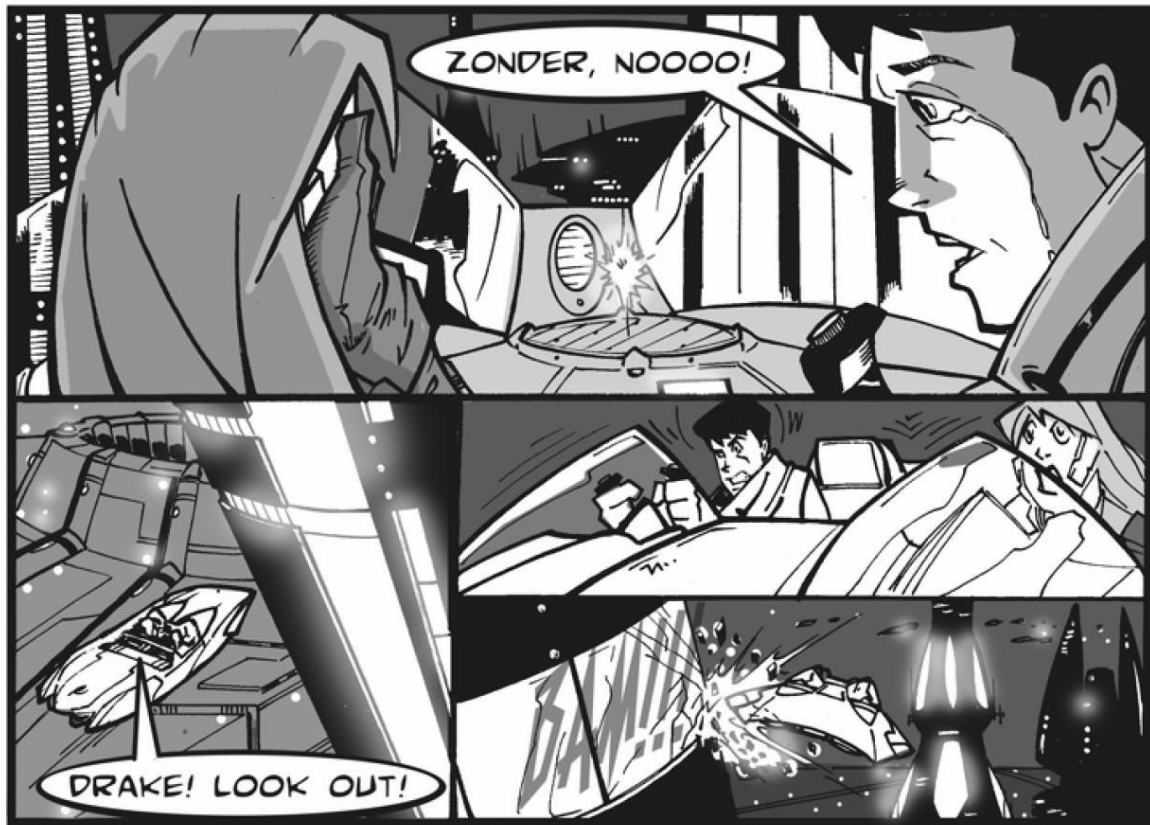






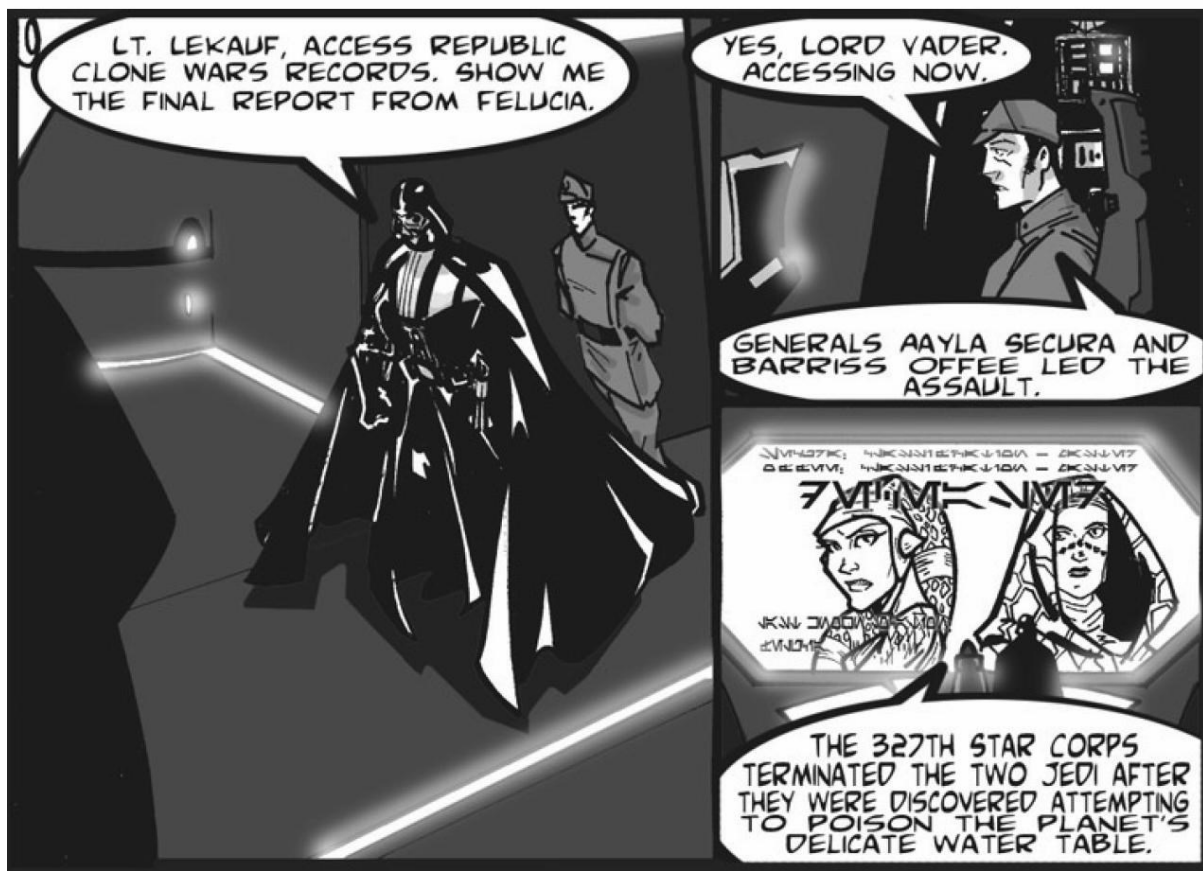
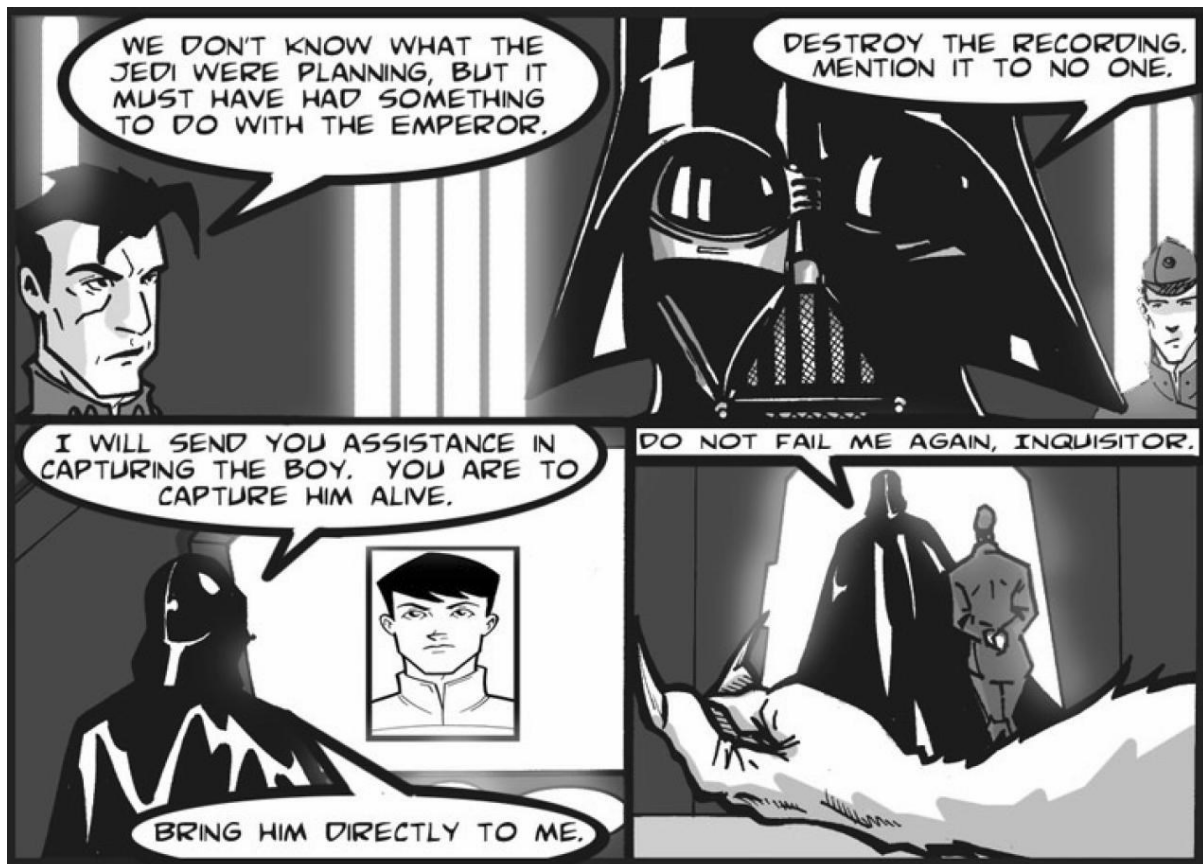


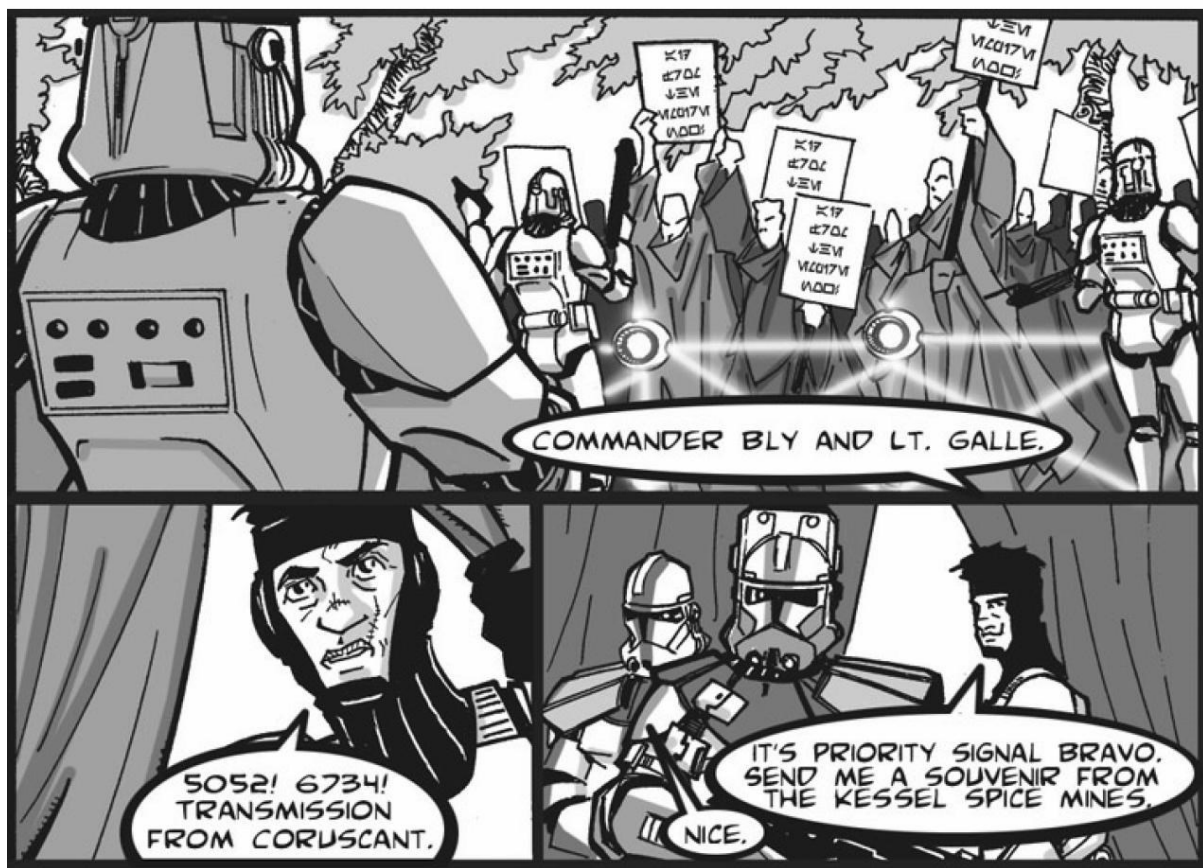












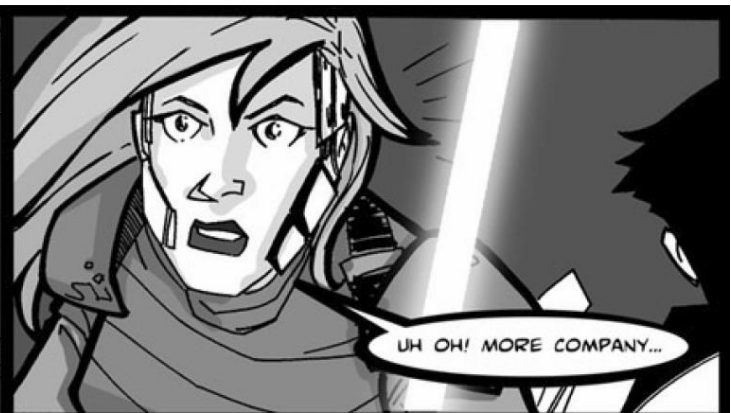
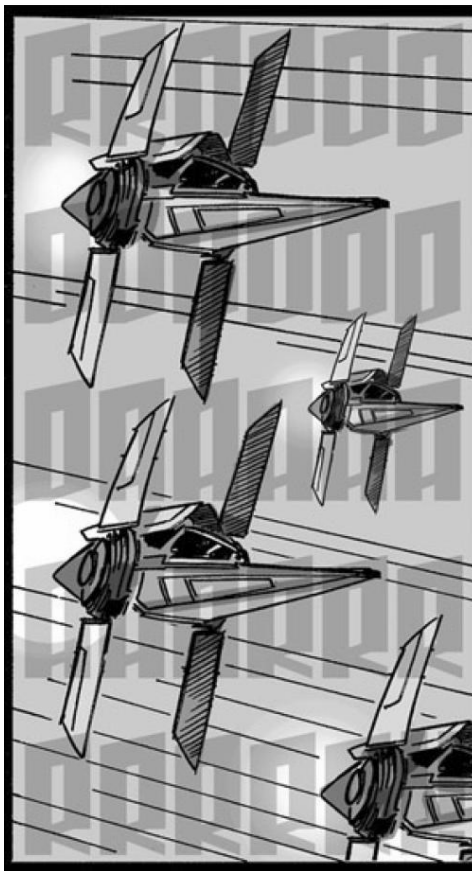
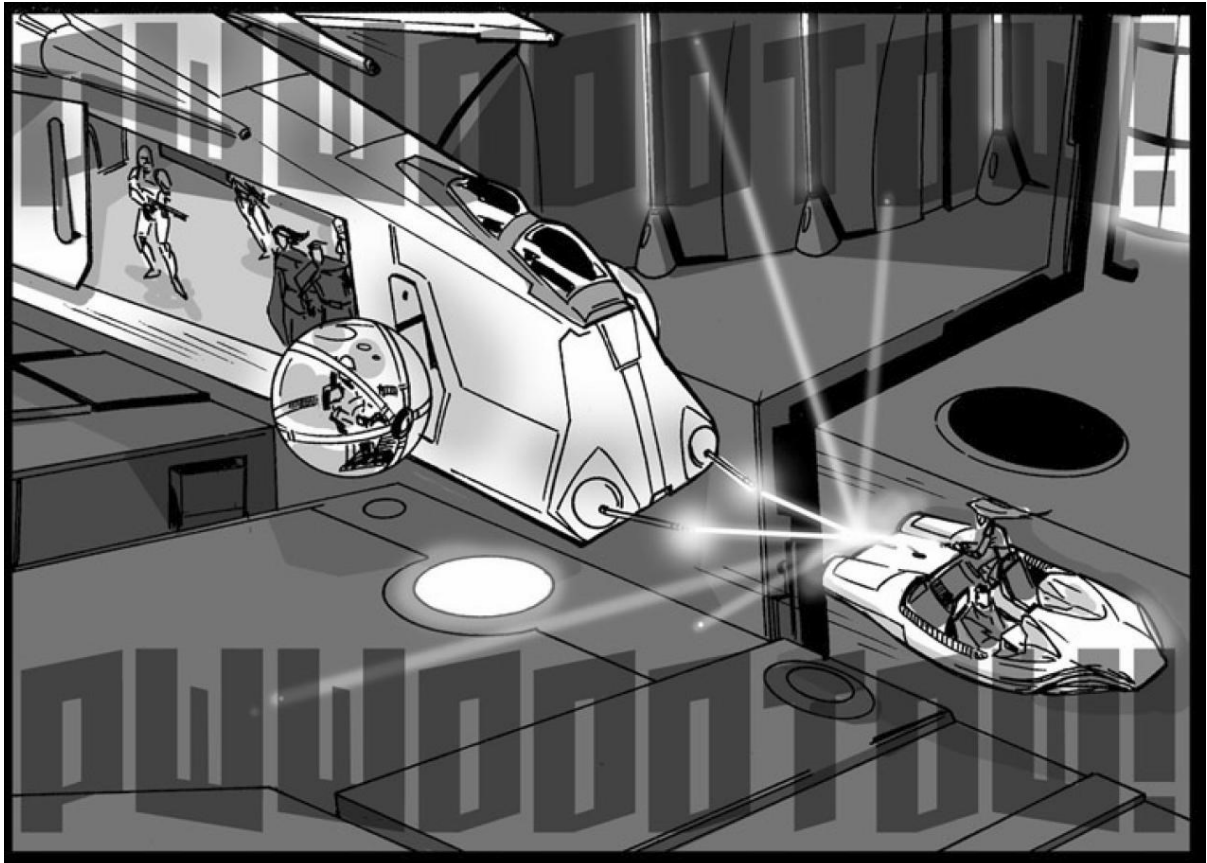




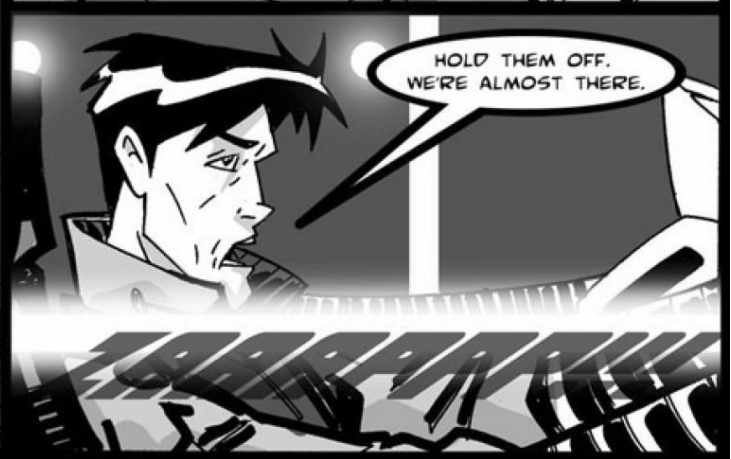








UH OH! MORE COMPANY...

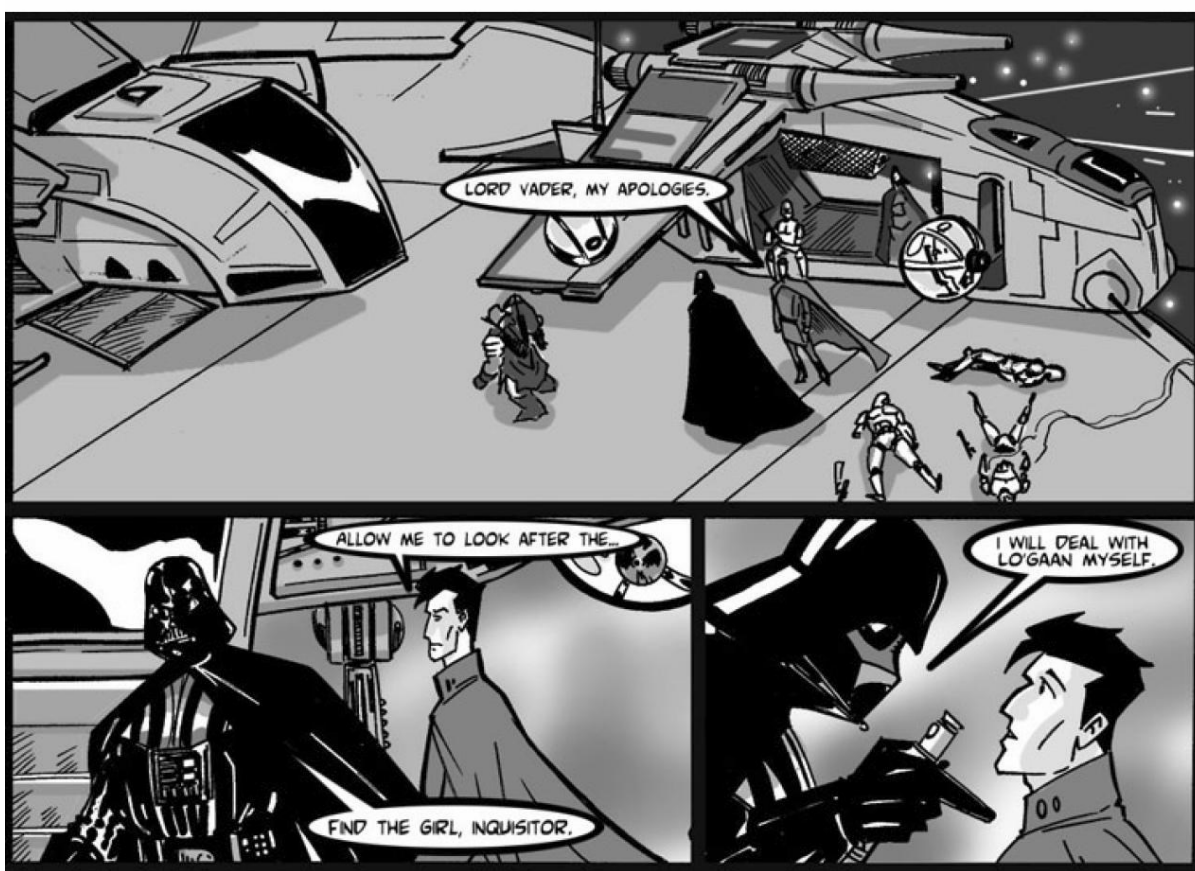
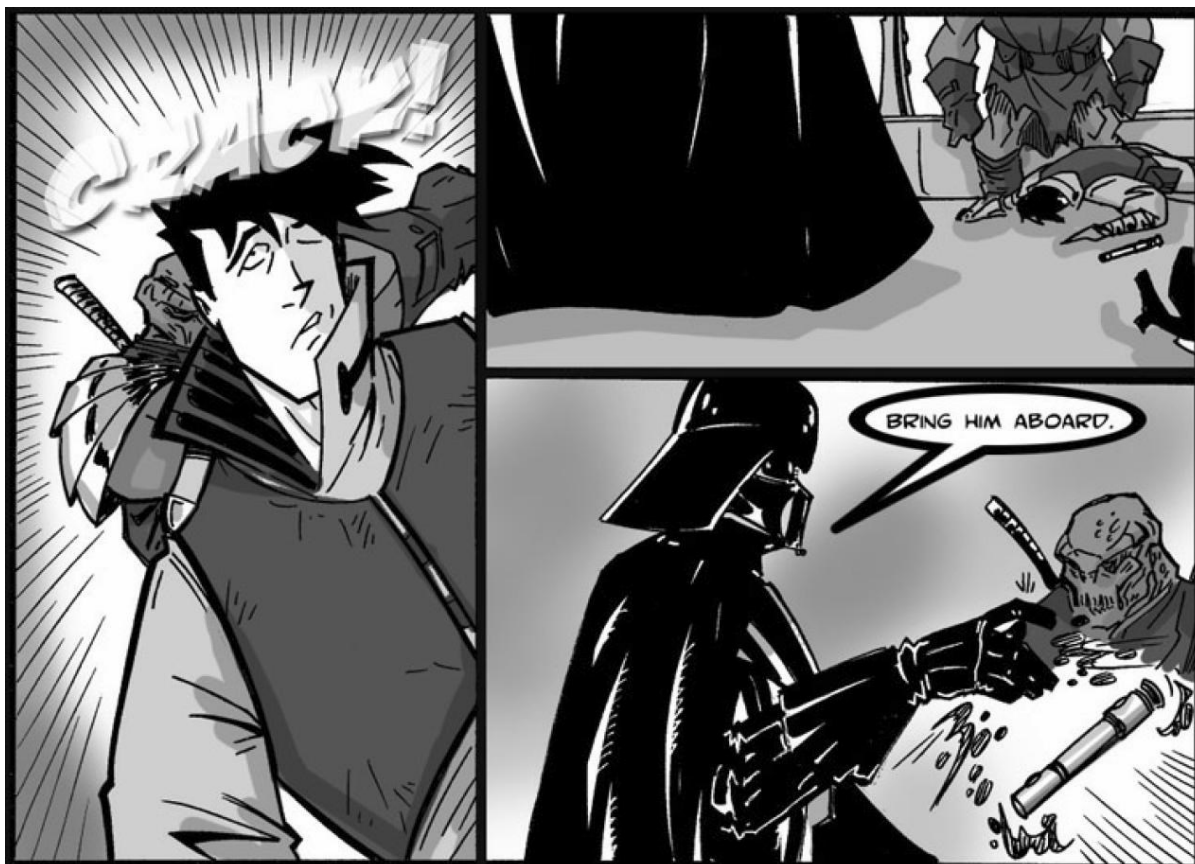


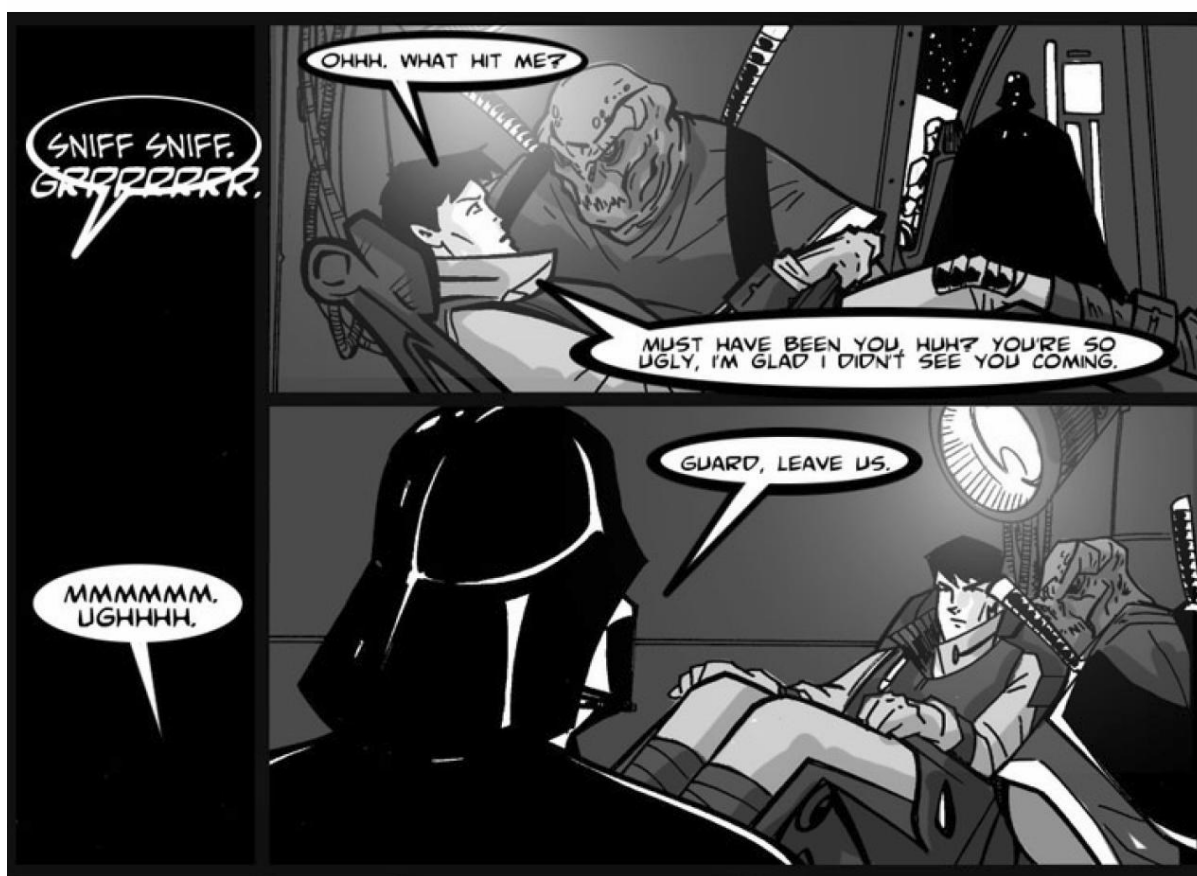
HOLD THEM OFF.
WE'RE ALMOST THERE.















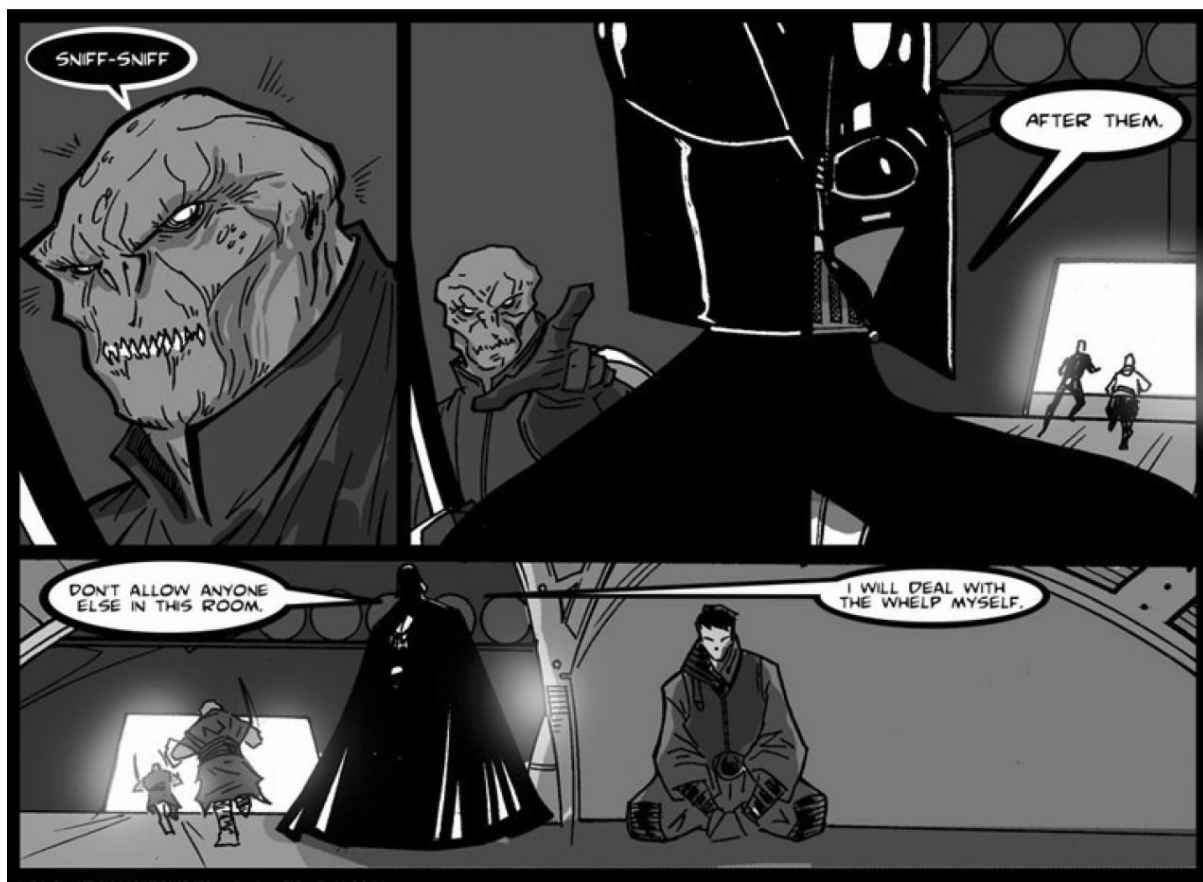


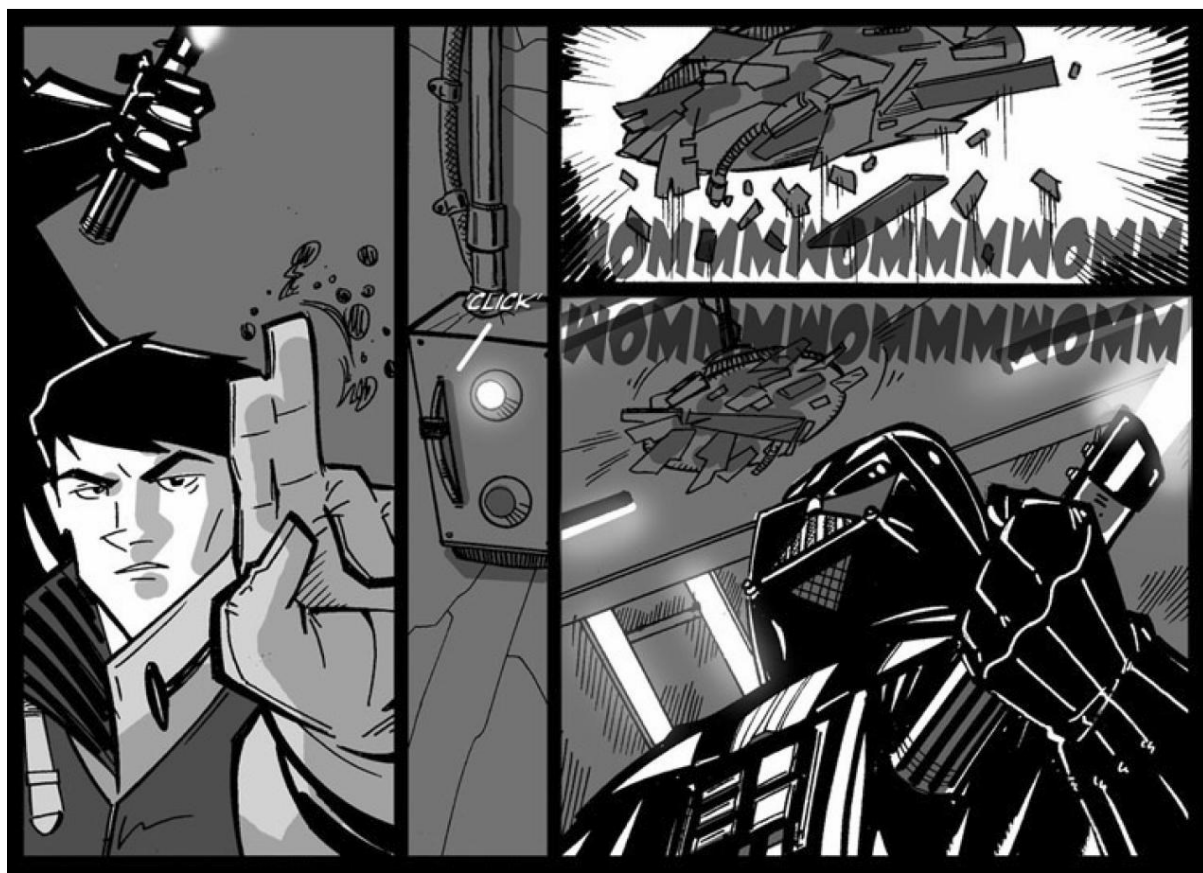


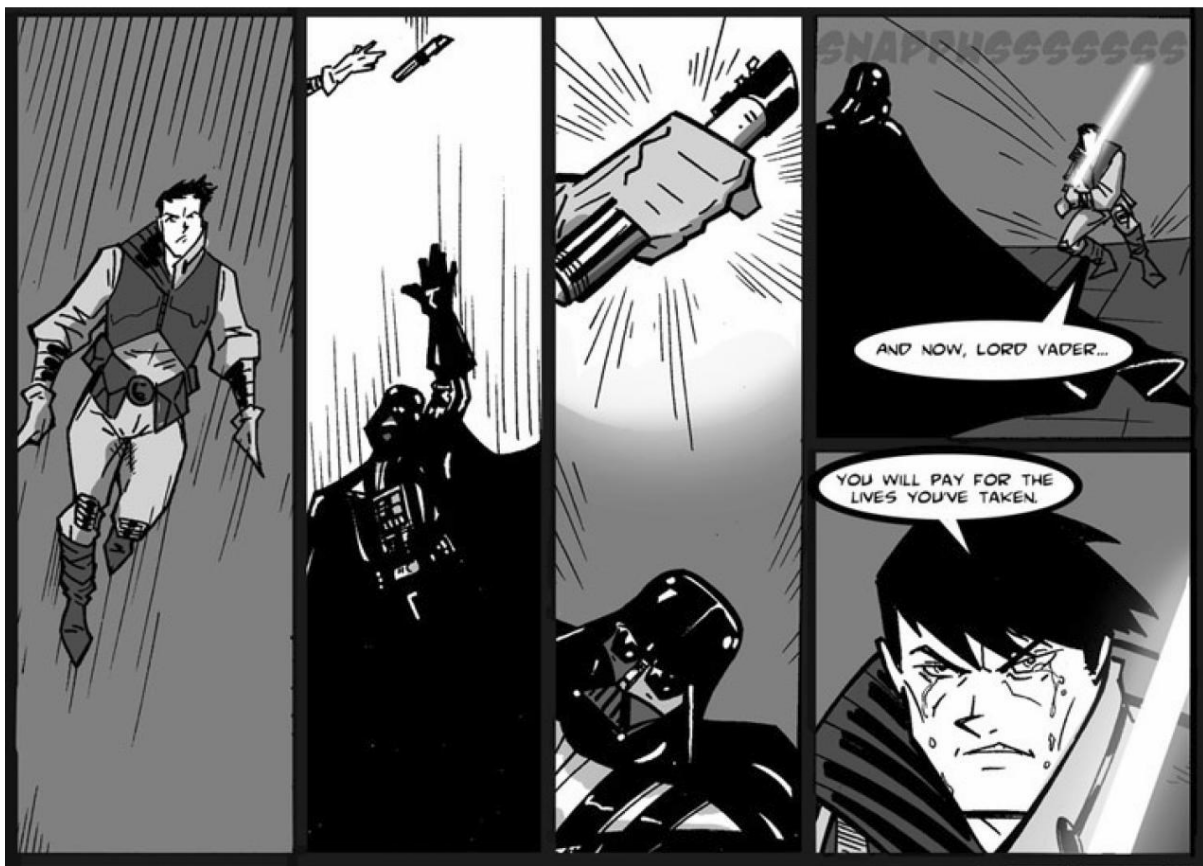
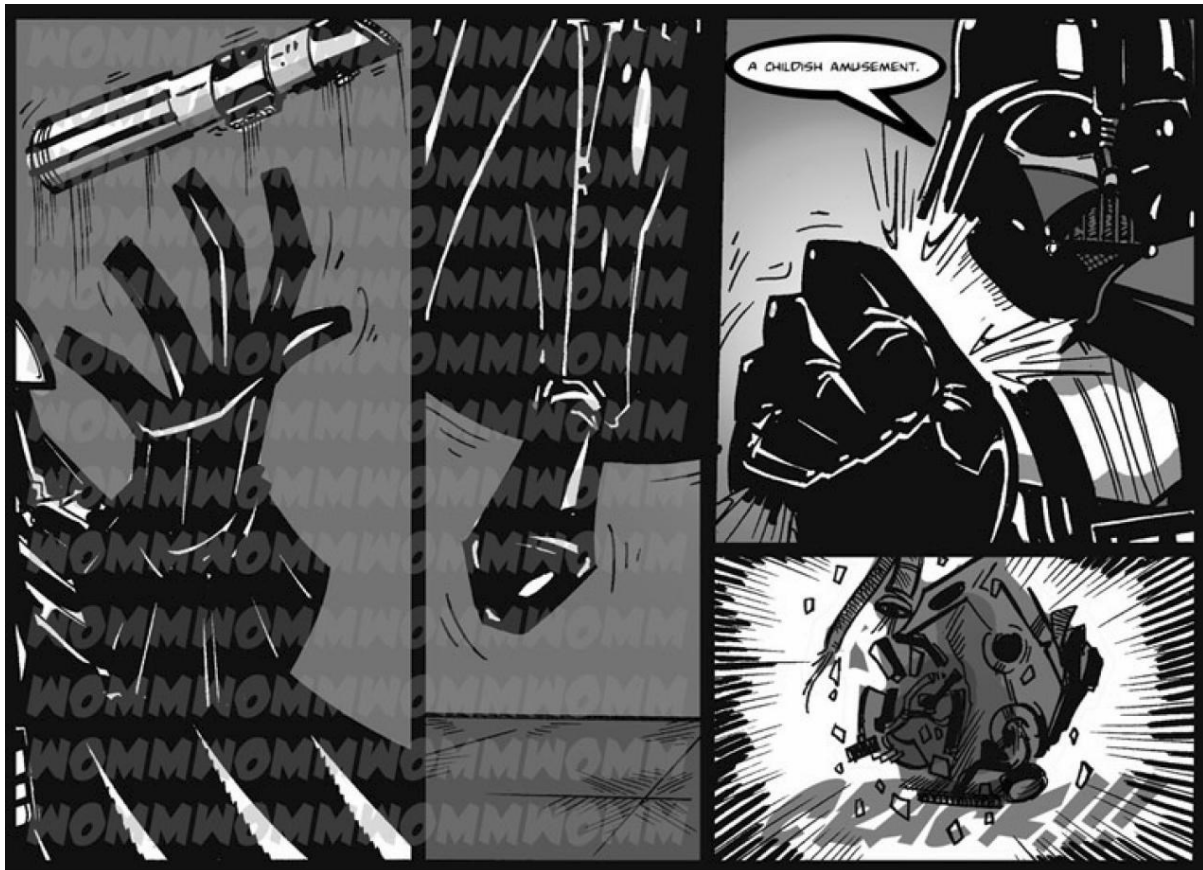










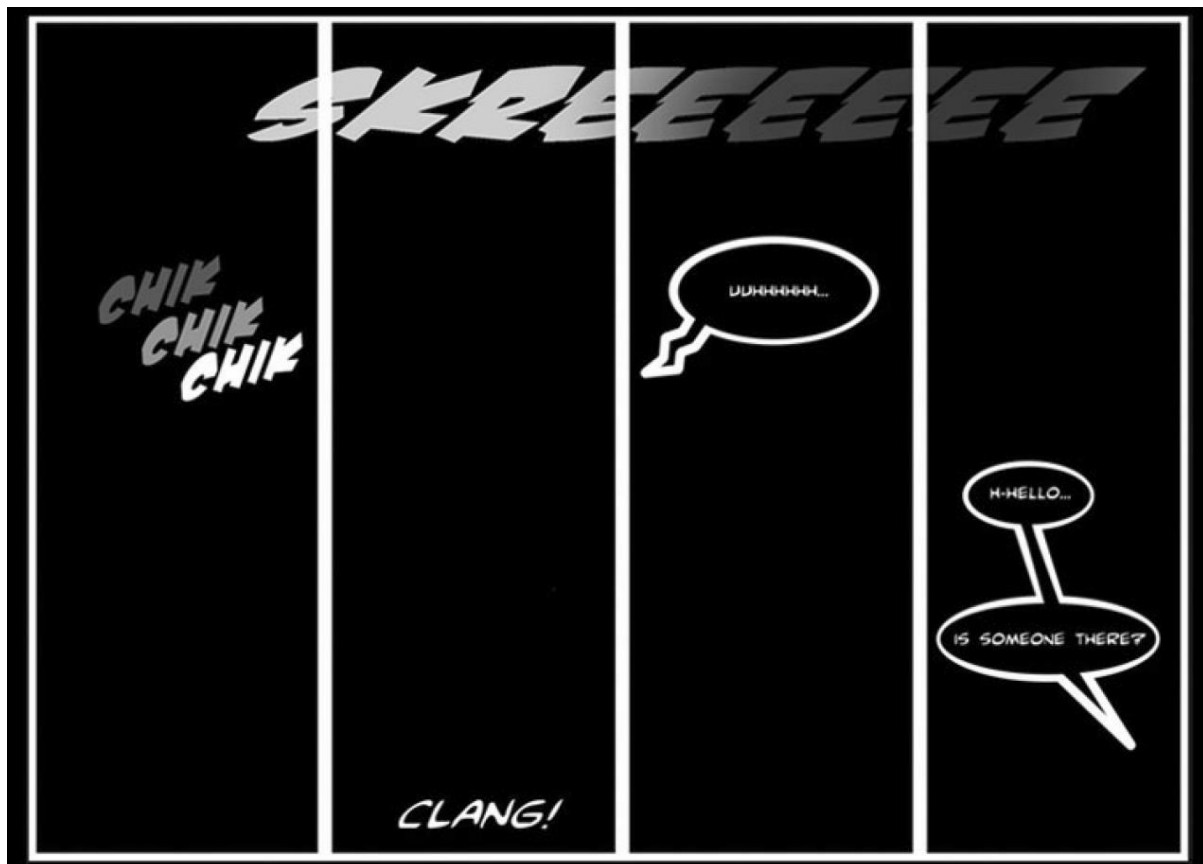












INQUISITOR TREMAYNE HAD BECOME TOO EMOTIONAL ABOUT US. HE COULDN'T BE TRUSTED TO TAKE US TO HIS MASTER.



A DIRECT APPROACH WAS NECESSARY TO ENSURE I HAD THE RIGHT AUDIENCE.



TRIPPING OFF A FEW OF THEIR CLUMSY DATA-ACCESS TRIGGER'S KEPT BLY ON MY TAIL TO TEPAS!

IT WOULDN'T STOP A LIGHTSABER, BUT A PRE-GROUNDED, INDUSTRIAL CONDUCTING SUIT WOULD SAFELY DISSIPATE THE ENERGY OF SEVERAL BLASTER SHOTS.



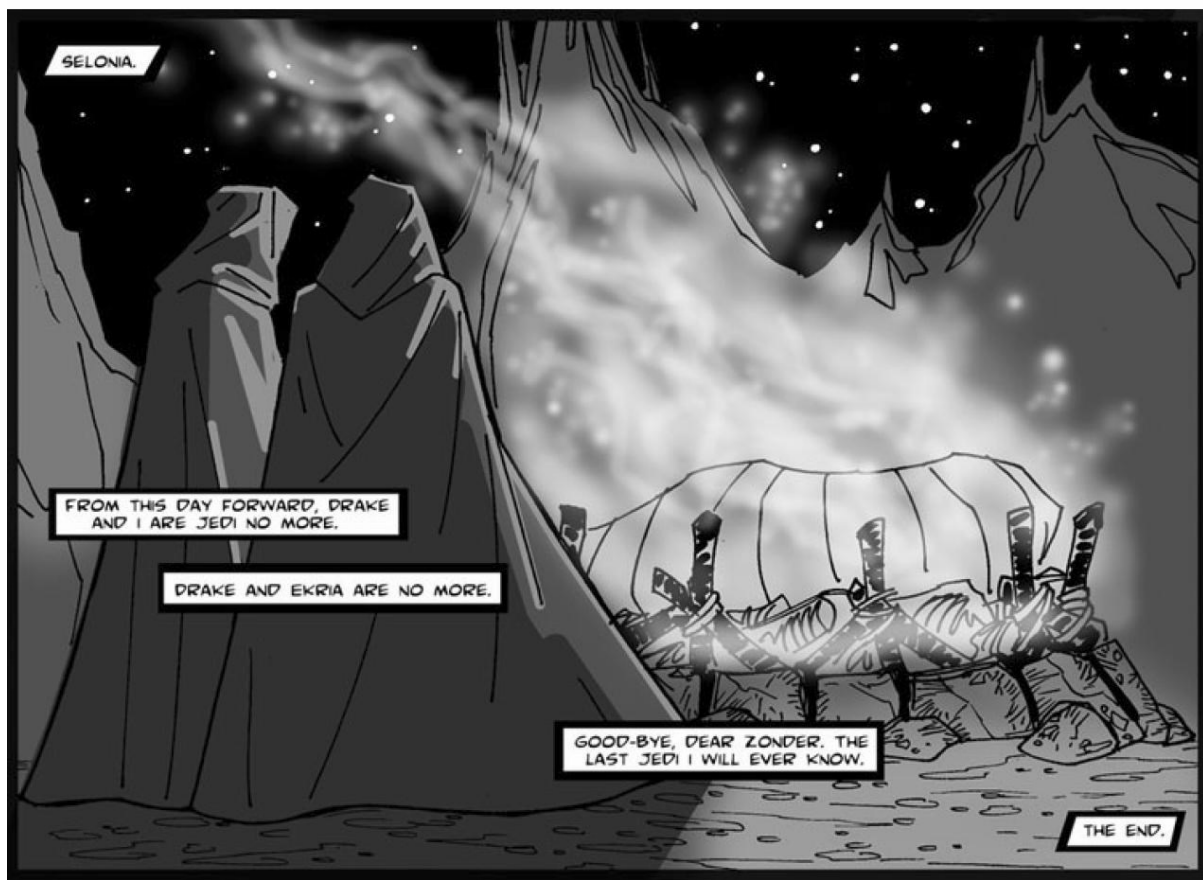
THE FINAL TOUCH WAS TO TRADE THE WORKINGS OF MY LIGHTSABER WITH A YOUNGLING'S TRAINING LIGHTSABER.



THE WILDCARD WAS DRAKE...

HE HAD TO FIND A WAY TO GET MY LIGHTSABER INTO DARTH VADER'S HANDS.





17 bby

A Two-Edged Sword

"What can you teach a clone in a few months what a man takes a lifetime to learn?"—Emperor Palpatine to Lord Darth Vader

YINCHORR, MID RIM: IMPERIAL TRAINING CENTER.

For a dead man, Sa Cuis still had a fine lightsaber technique. Lord Vader swung his blade and the two beams of red energy-rasped off each other.

Cuis—one of his clones, anyway—circled and Vader matched him, keeping a constant distance between them. He had no intention of killing the assassin again. Arkanian Micro had spent more than a year creating this clone of the Dark Jedi and it would have been wasteful to destroy him or any of his five brothers simply to prove superiority.

Besides, they were men. Vader tried not to lose sight of that. If he had wanted mindless predictability, he would have commissioned droids for the Imperial Army.

He was aware of two people watching the duel intently from the dais set a little above the training-hall floor; his master Emperor Palpatine and one of his aides, Lieutenant Erv Lekauf. Part of his mind could sense Lekauf's discomfort at being so close to the Emperor without Vader beside him.

"Enough," said Vader, and shut down his lightsaber. The Cuis clone snapped his blade off too but watched Vader cautiously until he stood back to allow the clones to continue their lightsaber drill with the instructor. Vader was satisfied. The clones had retained all the speed and sharp reflexes of the unfortunate Emperor's Hand whose genome was now theirs. He hoped they had somehow inherited his extraordinary loyalty, too.

I wonder if the Emperor knew Cuis would never reveal he was his Hand. I wonder if my master values that kind of devotion, or just expects it.

Vader went back to the dais to watch the clones continue their lightsaber training. They ran through parry and riposte, re-doublement and remise, red blades shimmering. The cavernous hall echoed with the hum of lightsabers and the clack of armor plates, a combination that Vader found oddly disturbing. Their instructor was yet another of Palpatine's many Hands—an assassin called Sheyvan, who had a taste for vibroblades as well as the more conventional lightsaber.

Vader paced up and down the hall, watching the sparring pairs with a careful eye. Hands often thought they were the only personal assassin in Palpatine's service, and most were unhappy if they found they were not. Sheyvan looked as if he was in that majority. His occasional glance at Palpatine was more accusing than adoring.

"Men need to believe they're unique," said Palpatine quietly. He always lowered his voice to make people listen carefully to him. "And women, too. We all like to think we are special and irreplaceable. It is a great motivator."

Sometimes Vader suspected Palpatine could read more than his emotions. "You made me feel I alone could help you defeat the Jedi Council, master."

"And that was true, was it not?"

Vader had wondered just once—and no more—how his life might have unfolded had he not been seduced by Palpatine's assurance that he was the only member of the Jedi Council whom he could trust. It was true, yes. But if he had resisted, Padme would still have died. At least now he had the power and position to remake the galaxy as he wished—orderly. He used it. He used it more every day.

"Not only do all men wish to be special," said Vader. "They also wish to know there is someone they can trust."

Palpatine's yellow eyes betrayed no reaction, just as he didn't seem troubled by Sheyvan's discomfort. The disappointment of those around him was of no consequence until they ceased to serve their purpose, and then they were discarded.

You will not discard me, master.

"One day, I may form a legion of Dark Jedi," said Palpatine as if the idea had just struck him. "They have great potential. This Cuis would be honored to see what's become of him."

It was as if he had never known Cuis. Vader had never mentioned that he knew Palpatine had sent Sa Cuis to kill him. He wouldn't name you, my master. Not even when I offered to spare his life. That's what I want in my troops. Loyalty.

Vader hadn't taken the assassination attempt personally. It was part of his training. The path towards Sith mastery had to be hard because the power it yielded was not for the weak or lazy. Vader understood that.

Lekauf—loyal, intelligent, with no special powers beyond the capacity for hard work—hovered at his elbow, radiating anxiety. Clones had been created from him, too, but he was very much alive to see them. He had even trained them. Now they were being evaluated, and they had passed inspection in all core skills except hand-to-hand combat.

"You still seem worried," said Vader.

"No, sir...."

Lekauf had spent six months on this miserable, barren ball of rock training his clones. If they passed muster, he could finally return to Coruscant. It was clear what his fears were.

"You haven't seen your wife and children for six months, and you worry that if your clones don't perform well, you'll be here for another six," said Vader.

Lekauf swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes, sir. I do."

His courageous honesty was one of the qualities that made him both a good clone donor and instructor. Vader's memories of missing someone dear—the memories that he had learned to wrap and lock away, almost without pain now—echoed in response.

And I trusted you too, Padme. I'm practiced at handling betrayal now.

"You'll see your family soon," said Vader.

Lekauf looked toward the training hall doors. He was a strongly built man in his thirties with an incongruously open face and scrubby light-brown hair. "I always worry about disappointing you, sir. But when I see what Dark Jedi can do, I wonder how ordinary humans can ever compete."

"Stormtroopers will never have to fight Jedi," said Vader. "Only Rebels."

Lekauf inhaled and held his breath as the six clones marched in. Vader heard it, however hard the man tried to suppress it. They looked as Lekauf himself might have done a few years earlier with that same expression of permanent optimism. And, Vader hoped, they would be equally efficient soldiers.

The clones, wearing the same Imperial armor as the Cuis batch, lined up in front of the dais and saluted. They were flash-trained from decanting to make them competent soldiers who could function in any army, but Vader needed them to be better than that. He needed them to meet the standards of the Kaminoan-cloned troops that still made up the majority of his storm-troopers.

"No lightsabers." Vader's voice boomed across the training hall. "Use durasteel staffs. This is an exercise. I want no serious injury."

Palpatine turned his head very slowly to look at him. Vader hooked his thumbs over his belt, waiting for the challenge.

"How can you test their suitability if you handicap them?" Palpatine's voice was soft and insinuating as it always was when he was planting an idea. "Is this not a concession?"

"No, my master. It creates more realistic conditions for the test." Vader stood his ground. "They need only to perform well against Rebels, who are not Force users. Just men."

Palpatine paused for two heartbeats, his sign of silent disapproval. "Very well."

Vader beckoned to Sheyvan to join them on the dais to clear the training hall floor for combat. The clones paired off, one Lekauf to each Cuis.

"Begin," said Palpatine. Lekauf swallowed again.

The clones stalked each other, durasteel rods clasped in both hands. Then metal crashed as they smashed staff against staff, struggling to drive the other back. One Lekauf clone, the name "NELE" stenciled on his chest-plate, brought his staff round in a low arc to upend his opponent. But as soon as the man fell flat on his back, he sprang to his feet again in one move and threw the Lekauf clone almost the full width of the training hall with a massive Force push. He hit the wall, the impact of his back-plate making the room echo, and struggled back to his feet, shaking his head to clear it.

The other five Cuis clones laid aside their staffs and sent their opponents' weapons spinning from their hands with a single gesture. All the Lekauf clones were knocked flat on their backs and pinned down by an invisible hand.

It had been a very brief demonstration. Lekauf looked resigned to his fate, hands clasped behind his back, eyes fixed straight ahead.

"I would not expect any man to defeat a Jedi without adequate weapons," said Palpatine.

Vader wasn't sure if that was a verdict of failure or simply an observation. He glanced at Lekauf. "No, master," he said, addressing the Emperor but watching his aide. "Perhaps we should now try this again without allowing use of their Force powers."

"No, I have seen enough." Palpatine pulled his cowl a little further over his face. "I will take the Cuis clones and train them further. Your Lekauf batch may yet prove useful for other tasks."

We could simply clone an entire army of the Cuis template. We know what they can do. But a soldier is the product of constant training. They need to see action.

"I suggest that we put them all on active service and see how they perform," said Vader.

Palpatine paused again. "Yes. But commission a battalion of Cuis models from Arkanian Micro anyway. I'm impressed by how much the clones have retained of his Force abilities."

Lekauf's clones had picked themselves up and were waiting at stand easy with their hands clasped behind their backs.

"Does that mean we're returning to Imperial Center?" Lekauf asked, unable to disguise his desperation.

"Yes, Lieutenant, it does." Vader strode ahead and Lekauf managed to match his pace. His six clones collected their helmets and weapons, and followed him as did the Cuis batch. Sheyvan brought up the rear, looking sullen.

"I apologize for our performance, sir," said Lekauf.

Vader noted the use of the word *our*. "I won't consider that failure in hand-to-hand combat until I see you fight ordinary men."

"That's very generous of you, sir."

No, it wasn't generous: it was fair. The test against the Cuis clones was merely an act of curiosity and not a reason to judge them unfit. Vader watched them mount the ramp of his Lambda-class shuttle and noted that even with their helmets on, he could tell the Lekauf from the Cuis by their bearing and their disciplined, synchronized stride alone. The Cuis clones moved more like athletes than soldiers, and—he couldn't help but notice this—they did not move like one machine.

"Smarten up," Lekauf snapped, instinctively knowing what Vader thought with his usual unerring accuracy. "You're in the 501st now."

COMMANDING OFFICER'S DAY CABIN, SHUTTLE ST 321, EN ROUTE FOR IMPERIAL CENTER.

"I think I might like the Cuis battalion under my own command," said the Emperor, leaning back in Vader's seat as the shuttle jumped to hyperspace.

Vader ignored his infringement of his territory and simply registered the fact that his master bothered to do it. It was another one of those little tests, the constant pushing and prodding designed to make Vader hungry for supremacy and angry enough to seize it. A thousand small threats would feed the dark side within him, but sometimes it seemed more for sport than education.

I don't need you to keep me sharp, master. I won't forget what drives me.

"They will not form part of the infantry, then, master?"

Palpatine's tone hardened a little. "I know how to command an army, Lord Vader."

"I mean that the Cuis clones are effectively all Hands and so might be ideal for special operations."

The Emperor accepted a glass of water from Lekauf, who never seemed to find menial tasks demeaning. "Yes, I shall train them to carry out many tasks."

Vader still managed to avoid the words that always hung between them now. "Cuis was loyal to his master to the end. He would not reveal his name."

"A commendable quality that I hope will be found in his clones."

"It may be genetic, but it can also be encouraged."

It can also be crushed. Vader thought of the man he had been— yes, there was no pain now, just a vivid and angry determination— and those who he had loved but who had betrayed him. He could still re-create that cold, focusing sense of disappointment when he realized that Palpatine had sent Cuis, and that the only thing he could trust him to do was to be a source of constant threat. Knowing how alone he truly was might have made him stronger, but it did not comfort him. He suspected it was why he surrounded

himself with the Lekaufs of this world—not simply because loyal soldiers were good soldiers, but because it reassured the small part of him that had been Anakin, the part that still

seemed sufficiently useful not to suppress. Lekauf was soothing: a man who liked to know where he stood, a man who simply wanted to excel and be given clarity of purpose in exchange for his devotion.

You won't disappoint me. So many people disappoint me. "Lieutenant," said Palpatine, looking past Vader to where Lekauf stood in patient silence. "What makes you loyal to Lord

Vader?"

Lekauf, normally uncomfortable around Palpatine, relaxed a little. Vader could feel it. Lekaufs doubts and passions seldom showed on his face, but he had them, and Vader could always taste them and sometimes relied on them to understand what was happening within the Imperial Army.

"With your permission, sir," said Lekauf, and looked to Vader. "It's because my Lord never asks his men to do anything that he wouldn't do himself."

"Laudable" said Palpatine.

Honest, thought Vader. He could have said that the Empire was all that was holy and I was its instrument. But he gave a soldier's answer.

The Emperor went back to sipping his water, and Lekauf still stood motionless. He wouldn't sit unless Vader was seated. Vader was used to that now and occasionally had to order him to sit when it was clear he needed to.

"Call your wife, Lekauf," said Vader. "Tell her when you will be arriving."

There was a brief flare of excitement in Lekaufs spirit that illuminated the Force for a brief moment. "Thank you, sir. Tliank you"

Lekauf saluted and disappeared through the hatch toward the cockpit. Master and apprentice remained silent until he was out of earshot.

"You constantly surprise me with your capacity for...compassion," said Palpatine, somehow shaping the word into an insult.

"Motivation" said Vader, daring to correct Palpatine, and he hoped he didn't think he had managed to sting him. "There would be no point in denying Lekauf such a small thing. Exercising power for the sake of it achieves nothing. Knowing when to let it go does"

"Making people want to please you is an important skill," said Palpatine. "You are becoming adept at it. Fascinating, is it not? To see that desire for approval?"

Ah, he enjoyed it. It was his sport. This was more than the exercise of political power. He liked to see people, helpless lesser people, in his thrall.

Vader decided he was content to be a simpler man, relying on strength and clarity. Your need for games will one day be your undoing.

Vader settled down in the seat opposite—normally the first officer's—and occupied his time catching up with reports from Imperial bases in the Outer Rim.

It should have been a short, uneventful flight. And it was, right up to the time when something tingled at the back of his throat and he looked up, hand reaching instinctively for his lightsaber. Then the red action stations alarm lit up the bulkhead and the warning klaxon deafened him.

Palpatine, still all glacial calm, placed his glass carefully on the nearest table and opened up the comms to the cockpit.

"What is the problem?" he asked.

There was nothing but the crackle of static from the other end of the link. Vader was already at the hatch, his Force senses tearing their way through what seemed like layers of padding and smoke to feel clearly what had been hidden from him by a concerted effort. The Dark Jedi were in revolt, struggling to screen their intentions from him, but all he needed to know was that they had no plans to be loyal to him.

They were probably coming for him.

The Cuis clones were still on their donor's mission, it seemed.

VADER strode down the passage to the cockpit, lightsaber drawn, the pulsing red action stations light reflecting off his armor. He could hear blaster fire.

He opened his comlink. "Lekauf, what's happening:" "The Cuis clones killed the pilots and seized the entire forward section of the ship, sir." The h-dappp of a blaster bolt interrupted the lieutenant."It's just me, my clones, and the navigation officer back here. We're trying to blast the hatches open at the bulkhead." "Wait for me."

"I don't think you should come down here, sir."

"I will deal with it. They want me."

"Sheyvan seems to want the Emperor, sir, not you."

Vader felt die shuttle lurch as if it had made a sudden course correction. He strode back to the day cabin and checked the navigation display repeater to check the heading; the shuttle was now heading for the Outer Rim. Palpatine was still sitting calmly in his seat, his lightsaber hilt on his lap.

A thought crossed Vader's mind. He phrased it carefully."Is this a live-fire exercise you saw fit not to mention to me, master?"

"It is not," said Palpatine.

Another of his games, though. Perhaps he has tasked the Cuis clones to kill we. "You are in danger, master."

"I can handle seven Dark Jedi, Lord Vader. What neither of us can handle, though, is the vacuum of space. So let us ensure there is no hull breach."

"Seven" said Vader."You include your own Hand, then."

"Either Sheyvan is dead, or he is part of this rebellion, in which case he will die anyway."

The Lambda was a small craft, 20 meters stem to stern, and Palpatine could fight as well with his Force powers from the day cabin as he could within lightsaber range of an enemy. Vader took his calm reaction as tacit proof that the Emperor knew he was not at risk but that Vader was. And suddenly, he resented him for compromising his crew, who deserved better than this.

"I will deal with this, master. There is no need for you to be involved." Don't put obstacles in my way. Don't try to test me further. Keep out of this fight." Lekauf and I will restore order."

Vader strode back down the passageway and came out at the hatch one compartment aft of the cockpit bulkhead. Smoke and the smell of discharged blaster filled the air; Lekauf, the navigation officer Pepin, and the Lekauf clones had stacked crates as a defensive barrier and were alternating between blasting at the hatch and attempting to force the sections apart with a durasteel bar.

"If we didn't have Jedi on the other side of the hatch, this would be open by now," said Pepin, grunting with the effort as he put all his weight on the metal bar.

"It's Sheyvan, sir," said Lekauf. "He led them."

Vader walked up to the hatch, moved Pepin out of the way with an assertive hand, and struck his balled fist against the durasteel twice.

"Sheyvan, give up. You can never defeat me."

Sheyvan's voice was muffled. Vader's amplified hearing picked out the words clearly even through the heavy durasteel.

"He betrayed us," said Sheyvan. "The Emperor betrayed us all."

"Open this hatch."

"He Uses us, Lord Vader. Don't you understand?"

Oh yes, indeed I do. And I could rip this hatch apart with the power of my will, but I want to hear more. How did you find the strength to defy Palpatine?

"I said open the hatch"

"He makes us believe we're each the only Hand and then we find—he throws away our lives, Lord Vader, and our loyalty deserves better."

Indeed it does. So did mine. Who am I still angry with—Palpatine or Kenobi? Which master disappointed me most?

"Cuis clones!" He rapped the hatch again. "You cannot have your donors memories. What makes you feel betrayed enough to threaten your Emperor?"

A dead man's voice answered with a slightly different accent, the accent of Sheyvan. "We're loyal to the man who trained us, Lord Vader."

"Terrific," said Lekauf. "Smart way to turn their qualities against us."

There was no disputing their capacity for loyalty, and Vader had been right to spot that quality in Cuis; but he hadn't known how betrayed Sheyvan would feel by finding he wasn't the only Hand, and by discovering what had happened to Cuis.

But Palpatine must have known the reaction was likely. Had he engineered this, putting a bitter man in charge of training

Dark Jedi who were highly likely to take on their instructor's cause? Had he influenced Sheyvan's mind? Vader never knew how many layers there were to Palpatine's intrigue, only that he was tired of it.

Lekauf was right. Loyalty was a two-edged sword. It was a pity that it was working against him at the moment.

"Lord Vader," said Shey-van. "Lord Vader, help us overthrow Palpatine. You could rule in his place."

Yes, I will oust him. But now seemed very soon, too soon. Vader considered it for a moment. He turned and caught Lekauf staring at him and dismissed the thought.

"Stand back and let me open this hatch, Lieutenant."

The Cuis clones heard him. One felt as if he had moved closer to the hatch. "If you attempt to storm the cockpit," he shouted, "we'll overload the laser cannons and destroy the ship."

Lekauf nodded. "They can do that, sir," he said quietly. "They have control of all weapons systems."

"Then we need to neutralize them safely."

"Safe for them?"

"Safe for us."

"If you're prepared to cope without life support for a while, my Lord, I can probably cut power to the whole ship," said Pepin. "The generator is on our side of the hatch."

That would cripple the laser cannons. It meant fighting in darkness, but Vader and the clones all had helmet enhancements that enabled them to see in infrared and low light. Pepin could manage somehow.

"They still have their lightsabers, sir, even if we kill the power," said Lekauf. "They're very good at deflecting blaster fire, and any heavier ordnance might blow a hole in our hull anyway."

"I've got something they'll have trouble deflecting" said Nele, the Lekauf clone who had been thrown across the training hall. He hefted a large rifle with a cylindrical chamber mounted where an optical scope would have been on a conventional blaster rifle. "Instant barbecue."

Lekauf looked embarrassed for a moment. "A flamethrower,

sir. He's right. Better to char the section than put a big hole in it. And it's quick."

Vader couldn't imagine his ultra-formal lieutenant teaching his clones phrases like instant barbecue, but there was clearly a side to the man he hadn't yet seen.

"Fire is the greatest danger in a vessel."

"Not as dangerous as letting them blow up the ship, sir."

"Very well," said Vader. He could use the Force to contain damage if he had to. Feeling a presence approaching, he looked around to see Palpatine, standing serene at the end of the passageway and simply...observing. "Make ready."

Vader regretted the waste of Cuis's clones. But this was a matter of survival, and if a Hand could turn on the Emperor, the man who had originally inspired his devotion, then he had instilled in his trainees a capacity to do the same.

Clones were always fast learners. That was a two-edged sword as well.

PALPATINE remained at the end of the passageway that ran the length of a Lambda's starboard side. He had projected a shimmering field in front of him, a silent statement that he would not participate in the fight.

"I have confidence in you, Lord Vader." That trick no longer works on me, master.

"And I have confidence in my men." Vader could see from the tight control on Lekauf's face that he was now far from inspired by the Emperor. For once, here was someone that he didn't appear able to imbue with the desire to please him. Lekauf seemed to feel what Vader felt. It was unsettling to see that in an ordinary man.

Pepin stood with a hydrospanner in his hand, ready to shut down the shuttle's drives and generator. Lekauf positioned the six clones on either side of the hatch with flamethrowers and blasters ready.

Vader stood back. What they needed was not so much his fighting skills as his ability to prevent the Dark Jedi from using the Force. They almost

certainly had a danger sense as acute as his; and seven of them together could reach out from behind that hatch and thwart Pepin or any of the clones.

He took a breath and centered himself, shutting out almost everything around him until he was aware of only the living beings in the shuttle. He could feel Lekauf and his men. He could feel Pepin at the power controls. And he could feel the seven vortices of dark energy behind the bulkhead in the forward section as if the durasteel wasn't between them at all.

There was a click and whirr of blasters charging and a faint hiss as three of the clones adjusted the pressure in their flamethrowers.

"Ready when you are sir," said Lekauf. Vader concentrated on Pepin and enveloped him in a Force shield.

Vader felt a sense of focus from behind the hatch, and as seven minds seemed to sense the threat and reached out, Pepin cut the generator and the shuttle was plunged into darkness, except for the shimmering red blade of his lightsaber. He raised his left hand, knowing exactly where the weakest point of the hatch was, and sent a massive Force push that swept the two halves of the hatch doors apart.

For a moment, frozen in time, Vader saw a forest of red lightsaber shafts exactly like his own. He punched a Force shockwave into the cockpit just as his field of vision erupted in hot yellow light and the loud whoomp of flame filled the ruptured compartment ahead of them, fire licking across bulkheads and darting into the cockpit hatchway.

He could see inside now. He heard screams. Three lightsabers had disappeared, appearing to merge with the flames. Fierce gold reflections danced on white armor. But three shafts of energy continued to glow, and he could see three of Cuis's clones enveloped in Force shields of their own, managing to hold off the flamethrower assault.

The stormtrooper plates and bodysuit were fire-resistant, and Lekauf's men had overcome that hard-wired human terror of fire to walk through the inferno and continue to shoot jets of burning gas into the compartment before them. Vader could see three bodies on the floor, matte-black from charring, and three moving saber blades, but where was the fourth?

He reached out with his mind, searching behind burning panels and control fascias. Another ball of fire rolled up to the deckhead from the muzzle of a flamethrower. Lekauf, tight at Vader's side and without a respirator, coughed as acrid smoke billowed back.

"Get clear," said Vader, and stabbed his Force reach through the shield of the Cuis clones, seizing their throats and crushing them. One yielded and Vader moved in fast, taking three strides forward and slashing his saber down to fell the clone.

Two were left, plus Sheyvan. He was still alive. Vader could feel him yet not see him. Lekauf's men fired rapid bursts of flame at the last two Cuis clones standing, pinning them against the port bulkhead as Vader moved in and they struggled to maintain the protective bubble around them. Smoke rolled from every surface. The shuttle's interior was made from fire-resistant materials, but the temperature in the confined space was now getting unbearable.

Nele fired another burst of burning gas at the Dark Jedi. Then one of the Cuis clones made a massive effort and sent the ball of flame back at Vader.

Vader's suit could withstand nearly every assault. But Lekauf, a man trained to react without pausing to debate, flung himself in front of him and took the brunt of the flame. He fell, gasping, as the clones closed in on the Dark Jedi and Vader burst apart their Force shields with pure focused rage.

Lightsabers winked out of existence.

Pepin, firre control, now! Vader shouted.

The shuttle's power came back, and a fine rain of fire retardant began falling from the conduits in the deckhead, dousing the smoldering surfaces. Vader dropped to one knee to grab Lekaufs shoulders and pull him clear.

Lekauf's action had been a foolish gesture and one Vader didn't need. But this was a painful reminder for him. Not so long ago, he had been the one burning and desperate for help: And the master he had trusted, Obi-Wan Kenobi, had abandoned him and left him to die.

Vader would not abandon Lekauf as he had been abandoned. He supported the officer's head, not to win his allegiance as Palpatine might, but because it was what Vader believed Kenobi should have done for him.

Lekauf's skin was blackened, but his eyes were open, wide and white in a shocked face. Vader called for bacta and Nele and Pepin ran to him with medpacs. Lekauf raised an arm and looked at the blistered back of his hand as if it wasn't his own. "My wife's going to be furious with me," he said in that nonsensical way that badly injured men often did.

"I bet your wife will just be glad to see you back in one piece," said Pepin. "Let's get you into the cabin."

Vader straightened up. The other clones were searching the charred and twisted forward compartment, blasters aimed.

Sheyvan had to be in there somewhere. It was too small a ship in which to hide. Vader stepped carefully through the steaming debris, now slippery with a coating of fire-retardant liquid, and gestured to the clones to leave him to the search. He felt the Dark Jedi was alive, but with a black layer of wet ash covering everything, it was hard to tell what was a body and what was simply a melted sheet of plastoid. He prodded lumps with his boot, light-saber in hand.

He counted eight bodies; six Cuis clones and the two crew who were already dead when the assault began. Then one blackened shape yielded slightly when he kicked it.

Sheyvan sprang to his feet, a nightmare smeared in wet, black ash. His lightsaber cut through the damp, hot air, and Vader blocked it with an upward thrust.

"He'll betray you too, sir," said Sheyvan, his lightsaber locked against Vader's.

"Few men will not try to betray me," said Vader and swung back at him. He could only focus on Lekauf's plight at that moment, an echo of his own, and rage was a fine lens through which to concentrate his power. He drove Sheyvan back across the slippery deck, sending him stumbling. Even now, after holding back flame and surviving smoke, the Dark Jedi was still a formidable

fighter, and Vader genuinely regretted the final stroke that sliced him from shoulder to hip and left him dead on the deck.

Sheyvan was what Palpatine had made him. Vader had once thought he was made as Palpatine had planned, but now he could be his own man.

The Emperor could even have influenced Sheyvan to do this. So many layers. So many games.

The cockpit was too badly damaged to pilot the shuttle back to Imperial Center. Vader sent out a distress signal and waited for rescue. He walked back to the day cabin to check on Lekauf and found Palpatine watching the emergency first aid as if it was a demonstration.

"Will he survive?" Vader asked. I know how this feels. I know the pain. "Are his lungs damaged?"

Pepin took him to one side. "He's very badly burned, sir," he said in a whisper.

"I survived burns once," said Vader. "And so will he." He leaned over Lekauf and stared into his face, seeing a fraction of the image that Palpatine must once have seen of him. "You are too loyal for your own good, Lieutenant."

"That's my job, my Lord."

He might have been attempting humor. Judging by the expressions on the faces of the clones he had trained, he had created that same sense of allegiance in them. They had almost formed a defensive line around him. Nele handed Pepin a succession of bacta-soaked swabs.

"You never disappoint me," said Vader. Lekauf, face and hands swathed in wet gauze, blinked a few times. "Your apology was premature."

Lekauf would recover in time, and he might even train men again. But he would now be the progenitor of a clone battalion; his men had defeated Dark Jedi and, even if assisted by Vader, they had still given a good account of themselves.

Lekauf could be proud. And at least he would see his family again. Scarred or not, he had certain things that others—even Vader—might envy.

IMPERIAL PALACE, CORUSCANT: TWO DAYS LATER.

"How is your lieutenant?" asked the Emperor.

Vader studied the ranks of the 501st Legion from the window overlooking the parade ground. There was a certain comfort in knowing that for most of them—those whose whole life was soldiering and who had no ambitions beyond that—life was a straightforward process of doing their job with no thought of who they might oust or assassinate or outmaneuver.

"He's improving, master."

"Loyalty is a fine quality."

"I have asked Arkanian Micro to produce a battalion of Lekauf clones. I think they have proved themselves."

"Yes." Palpatine wandered across to the window to stand beside Vader as if curious about whatever had caught his attention. "Cancel the orders for the Cuis clones. For the time being."

I already have. "It will be done, my master."

"You are still troubled. I feel it."

Vader decided to risk the question that was on his mind. Palpatine knew it was there anyway. The only issue was whether Vader would ask it.

"Master, was Sheyvan's rebellion designed to test me?"

Palpatine turned his head sharply. The cowl shadowed his eyes: Once his face had seemed kindly to Vader. "If it was a test, Lord Vader, it was for the clones, not for you. And if it was, then the Lekauf batch proved the most worthy."

So that was your motive. With a little mental manipulation to turn Sheyvan's resentment into hatred. And what a poor reward for Lekauf.

Vader curbed his anger simply to deny his master the taste of victory. "A real crisis shows what a man is made from." "I have not ruled out more Cuis clones, of course."

sparring; the Emperor neither lied nor told the truth. Now it had ceased to be a challenge, and Vader longed for a simpler relationship. There was a very fine line between strengthening a man through constant challenge and turning him into an enemy.

"Perhaps the solution to having to watch your back is to make your enemy watch theirs instead," said Vader.

I will come for you one day.

"Or have others want to watch it for you," said Palpatine and turned to leave his apprentice alone in the anteroom.

Vader now knew there were no Force users, dark or otherwise, who he could wholly trust, and he trusted his own master least of all. Vader had no loyalties beyond himself—except for his interest in the wellbeing of the likes of Lekauf, men with no extraordinary gifts or powers whatsoever.

How far ahead do you plan your little games? You waited decades to defeat the Jedi. You used trillions of lives to achieve it. Will I ever be able to think enough steps ahead of you?

"I feel Dark Jedi are not suitable for the Imperial Army."

"With the right commander they would be."

"And who would train them?"

"You, Lord Vader."

"I prefer ordinary soldiers. They don't covet power. I would spend all my time watching my back." "Indeed you would," said Palpatine.

It had been a game at first, an annoying one, but just verbal

Unless, of course, you counted simple honesty as a gift.

At that moment, he thought that it was the equal of any Force power. Yes, Vader preferred ordinary men made excellent by effort. The part of him that was Anakin Skywalker remembered the few things he had struggled to achieve—love, excitement, freedom—and thought how much more they had thrilled him than his prodigious and easy powers.

He had been a man himself, once. Thinking of Lekauf, he wondered if he would ever choose to be one again.

Journal Of The 501st

Naboo- Imperial Diplomacy

During the rise of the Empire, the Emperor's home planet of Naboo rapidly established itself as a major irritant. After a number of Naboo's ambassadors were sent home in various states of dismemberment, her newly elected Queen broke off diplomatic ties, and began exploring military options. Clearly it was time for a regime change, a change that would be effected by the 501st, now under the direct command of Darth Vader. Our orders were simple: to infiltrate the city and take out their leader, sending a clear signal to other potential troublemakers in the Empire.

With the Queen eliminated, Naboo quickly fell in line. It was the first time the 501st was called upon to "adjust" a planet's government, but it wouldn't be the last. Within months, the 501st gained a well-deserved reputation as "Vader's Fist".

Mustafar Space- Preventive Measures

Although the Clone Wars were over, some people never seemed to get the message. The worst case of denial was Gizon Delso, a Geonosian Separatist who'd somehow escaped Lord Vader's efforts to wipe out the remnants of the CIS. Lord Vader tracked him to Mustafar and brought us in to finish the job. It seemed like a simple enough mission, but when we saw the fleet of droid ships hovering over the planet, we suddenly realized that Dellso's denial mechanisms were more dangerous than we'd imagined.

The slight whiff of nostalgia the 501st had enjoyed fighting the droid fleet over Mustafar had already grown sour by the time we'd established orbital positions. Now it was time to find out what this was all about.

Mustafar- Tying up Loose Ends

By the time we'd made our way to the molten surface of Mustafar, it was apparent that Dellso had been a busy little bug. All by his lonesome, he'd found a previously hidden droid factory, fired it up and cranked out his own private army of battle droids. Needless to say, this got the men of the 501st a little hot under the helmet, and not just because of all that lava. Truth be told we'd all had our fill of those gear heads during the war, and we couldn't stomach the thought of going through another one. So we blew them up. Blew up the droids, blew up the factory, damn near blew up the planet.

The destruction of the mining facility put an end to any thoughts of a second droid rebellion. For the first time in years, the men of the 501st could relax and get about the business of maintaining an Empire, rather than building one.

Darth Vader: Sith Lord

Volcanic fire seethes and spits at his feet as the molten river roars, its rumblings an echo of his own agonized howls on this blackened shore five years gone. The lava's glow bathes him in scorching heat. Encased in that black armor, he feels nothing.

A hissing sound escapes his helmet as his unfeeling cyborg hands release it, lifting free the face of Darth Vader, and exposing the ruined head of Anakin Skywalker. The scorched Mustafar air fills what remains of his lungs. Wheezing, he breathes it in as deep as he can, welcoming the pain, embracing its familiarity, and its contrast to the stale, tasteless air to which he's grown accustomed. The pain brings the clarity he seeks. The pain of fire, and of memory.

He holds the helmet before him and gazes into the black and soulless eyes of the creature he's become. Behind the mask, the river of fire flows. Ghostly echoes of his past flow with it. There have been many paths to choose in the course of his life. The choices made there eventually led him here, to the site of his rebirth, where he was baptized in agony and betrayal. The bright blade

of his best friend together with the molten fires of this hateful world took everything.

He was left to die with only his resolve. That same resolve drove him to dark deeds in the name of a greater galaxy. It carried him through his betrayal of Master Windu, the slaughter of his Jedi brothers and sisters, and the death of his wife. All that was Anakin Skywalker was burned away by action and fire. All that remains is the purity of this thing in his hand.

The black, skull-like visage returns his gaze as he takes one last rasping breath of the air around him. Raising the mask to his head, he locks it in place. Behind him, his black cape whips and snaps in the hot wind as the familiar sound of Lord Vader's mechanical breathing returns.

Worm Tracks

"Willye worm, Willye worm —"

Eleven-year-old "Willye" Nereus ran from the rec hall, clamping both hands over his ears to deafen the chanting. A fusion cart sped toward him. He ducked against a gray wall and panted. The cart sped up the residence dome's corridor. "Watch it, shorty!" shouted the driver. Her orange hair stuck out in all directions, corded in tufts like long, fuzzy horns.

Leaning against the gray wall, he stared up at a brilliant blue ceiling that identified this dome sector as Transit, free to all six guilds. He glared first at the cart, then back at the rec hall, and nursed his anger. The "worm" taunts infuriated him. No one ever touched the dark, ropy birthmarks on the backs of his hands, not even inside his family ...

Especially not inside his family.

Angel-faced, with cherub eyes and a tiny, bow-shaped mouth — beautiful, except for the worm tracks — Willye had followed his older brothers outside the dome one day shortly after his fifth bornday. "Pity pretty Willye Worm," they'd chanted as they walloped him.

He'd fled back indoors, crying for justice. His parents had called him tale-bearer. He'd begged for surgery to remove the ugly birthmarks. They'd sent him to his cot.

Now he knew better than to ask for grace. People who had power made others obey them. Even his father said the birthmarks would stay until he'd met some unknowable "character" standard.

So Willye needed power. He had to pay back those bullies in the rec hall. His brothers, too.

Willye worm, he repeated bitterly. Willye worm, Willye worm ...

He'd read a sidetext about worms, yesterday, on a biotech lesson board. Worm-like parasites lived on many animals native here on OrulShai III — in their stomachs, lungs, and hearts, and sometimes even their eyes. Sometimes, they made animals sick or killed them; this was why settlers rarely ate native meat. Native animals were as dirty as the fanged aliens who'd once tended them, creatures whose tri-D images still gave Willye nightmares five seasons after the last village was eradicated.

If Willye could find that sidetext again — then bag a sick animal and harvest three or four parasites ... how many? ... four bullies, two brothers ... six — he'd fix some people ...

He fingered the cruel mark on his left hand. No one would treat him like an animal when he grew up.



The Dovorán Holochess Player

"Ah, yes, Hart Daele. Yes, I remember Daele very well. Charming man. Stuffy, of course. You know how theoretical mathematicians can be; imagine a *Jedi* theoretical mathematician. Stuffy isn't the word.

"At that time I was living on Damualer Triac with my second wife, Hannah, and he was stationed in Samarine Province, about seven kiloparsecs away. We were engaged in a marathon Divoran holochess competition. You know the game, right? Each player controls fifteen holographic armies on a multi-level playing board, and the object is to capture all fifteen of the opponent's Emperor pieces. He came out two games ahead by the end of it, the little walking abacus.

"Anyway, it took us a little while to get to know each other's playing style, about five years or so, but after that, whenever he thought I wasn't concentrating, he'd use a computer to make his moves. I could always tell; the quality of game play dropped noticeably. That was the point, of course; a gentle prod to get *me* to play better. Ah well. There weren't many people who were able to match Daele at Divoran holochess ... He certainly made me work hard enough.

"Where was I? Ah. At this time there used to be a beautiful forest about two kilometers to the south of my home, and I regularly used to walk there. And always, just when I went past this storm-blasted Millennium Oak, I used to hear his ethereal voice coming from nowhere saying, 'Lancer to Queen's Second Plane 4' — he used to use the *old* chess notation, y'know — and I always used to stop still, raise one finger, and say, 'I shall make a note,' before continuing with my walk. We had that routine going for well-nigh forty

years ...

"No, it never has been true that the Jedi can only farsee across stellar distances. Daele and I played thirty chess games like this, and that takes projective telepathy ... All our limits come from within ourselves. Saves a fortune in communications bills ...

"I used to send my reply to him just before he was sitting down to dinner. He had the chessboard in his private quarters — a beautiful crystal set, his — and that meant he could make the move on his board as soon as I had told him.

"The picture? Oh, just my little hobby. I have always liked chess, and I enjoy holographic painting ... I've done a number of boards in different styles, with different backdrops. That one was challenging because the pieces are very reflective and in those odd, twisty shapes, which meant that the reflections of the planet behind them appeared in some strange places. Oh no, it's far too cold for the sitting room, but it fits in quite well here. My wife says she doesn't like it because she ends up staring at it for hours without being able to make any sense of it. It does tend to make people ... uncomfortable. Ah, well. It's a check position actually, but the illusion makes it hard to decipher. I'll give it away one day, when I find someone it suits.

"I think that's enough about Divoran holochess for now. Have some more spice liqueur, and I'll tell you about the rest of the clan ..."

— Excerpt from "An Interview With Haaran Balmor, Jedi Master," from Madelein Aurin's book, *Heroes Of The Republic*, Sarlain Star Press, 96.72 (All Formats Now Banned)

The Guns of Keldoro-Ai

Steniplis Sector, Outer Rim Territories

All things considered, Shea Hublin didn't like the planet Kelrodo-Ai very much.

The volcanic world's thin soil was broken by outcroppings of black rock pitted with holes, the air left an acrid taste on the tongue, and the light was yellow and harsh.

Then there were the Separatist clankers salvaged and reprogrammed by their new masters. The Empire had taken control of the galaxy's central systems in a quick and orderly fashion, but out here in the spiral's Western Reaches, troops had been few and authority almost nonexistent. Separatist diehards had fled here to make common cause with pirate kings and slave lords, bringing a wealth of hardware with them. Now, too much of that hardware was here on Kelrodo-Ai, tucked beneath a planetary shield.

Shea and the rest of his squadron had dug in at a hastily assembled forward air base beneath that shield. Their mission was to bring down the generators that powered it—generators hidden in the heart of the mountain that loomed across the plains.

The Kelrodoans called the fortress the Citadel of Axes, and claimed it had been their masters' stronghold for millennia. Now, it was the key to the sector, protected by innumerable cannon emplacements and fighters. Fifteen of the Imperial 77th Wing's pilots had already died on Kelrodo-ai. Shea knew more would do so.

No, Shea Hublin didn't like Kelrodo-Ai at all.

But he wasn't going to say that now. This moment demanded a different message.

He turned and nodded at the holocam operator and the pretty reporter from Eriadu News Service.

"Ready when you are," Shea said.

The reporter stood beside him, squinting in the sunlight, and turned to face the holocom. Behind them, the squadron's V-wing fighters waited on the scrubby Kelrodoan turf, traces of Republic insignia still visible on their fuselages.

"This is Eris Herro of ENS, embedded with the 77th Air Wing at Kelrodo-Ai," she said. "And this man needs no introduction-Captain Shea Hublin, the hero of Deepspace Cimarosa and Feather Nebula."

Shea waved that away, embarrassed.

"Captain Hublin, the resistance here has been unexpectedly fierce. Can you update us on your mission objectives?"

Shea pulled at the bottom of his tunic as the holocom operator turned and panned the distant mountain.

"Ma'am, I'll leave assessments of the overall campaign to Moff Tarkin.

I won't deny that Kelrodo-Ai is proving a difficult target, but let's remember this: The Western Reaches Operation has restored security and the rule of law to eight sectors so far, with successful liberation operations on 95 worlds.

We are the best-equipped and trained military force in galactic history. And we are the Emperor's justice. We may face setbacks, but we will prevail."

"The Emperor's justice? What do you mean by that, Captain?"

"This has been a lawless region for far too long," Shea said. "I've seen terrible things here: Separatist gulags, slave camps-things that exist because of Republic corruption and Separatist rebellion. We're here to shut them down. Because we believe in the vision of men like Emperor Palpatine and Moff Tarkin- in Imperial authority and prosperity."

"Some note there are no humans on Kelrodo-Ai, Captain. They say reclaiming this alien world is a waste of valuable Imperial lives and resources."

"Ma'am, those people need to remember that we are one Empire," Shea said. "One Empire in which every species has a role to play, to the extent that its capabilities allow."

"My goodness, Captain-you're starting to sound like one of those alien rights activists we've interviewed recently!"

Shea smiled.

"Don't worry, Mom-I'm not going to be bringing any alien girls home for dinner! But no matter what shape we are, Miss Herro, we all love our children. The Kelrodoans may not have sophisticated technology. They may have primitive customs. But they deserve to contribute to the Empire while enjoying its security- and that's what we're bringing them."

"Inspiring words, Captain Hublin," said the reporter, turning back to the cam. "This is Eris Herro, reporting from Kelrodo-Ai."

The ENS crew had departed and Shea found a stool, staring across the plain at the mountain and its hidden fortress. Lieutenants Kaal and Starks, his fellow flight leaders, ambled over as one of Sword Squadron's Kelrodoan grooms shuffled forward, keeping his eyes on the ground.

"Thank you, Fara," Shea told the alien, extending his foot. "Excellent job shining these."

The Kelrodoan grunted, black eyes fixed on the ground. Kaal-Scimitar Flight's leader-eyed Fara with barely concealed distaste, then clapped Shea on the back.

"Good show, Hublin!" he said. "You actually sounded like you believe that One Empire poodoo."

Shea looked around, worried one of the minders from the new Imperial Security Bureau might be nearby. Kaal was too careless about what he said- and too certain that he knew what Shea thought.

"I do believe that poodoo," he said.

"Did you know Fara here was a warrior chieftain? Maybe he's never fired a blaster or been aboard a Star Destroyer, but he got to be a chieftain somehow. Doesn't that suggest he has something to contribute?"

"We've got enough problems without handing blasters to the likes of him," Kaal grumbled.

Before Shea could reply, Starks jumped in to keep the peace.

"After this next hop, I'm gonna be the holostar," he said with a grin. "You know, I think that Miss Herro likes you, sir. And she's not the only one-any more heroics and you'll be up for a commendation from Moff Tarkin himself."

"Not likely." Shea said. "We're a small part of a very big operation. Moff Tarkin has a lot more to worry about than us."

"Oh, I bet he's watching," Starks said.

"And others too. I could see Imperial Center making you a clone template, sir."

"Don't even say that," said Shea, scowling.

"You'd refuse?" Kaal asked. He looked genuinely surprised.

Shea looked around, and was relieved to see that none of the squadron's clone pilots were nearby. Only then did he answer Kaal. "They did something to their brains-made them more obedient," he said. "It's creepy. Or maybe there's just something about the idea of other me's out there that I don't like."

Kaal frowned, but Starks was grinning. "Imagine a whole squadron of Starks!" he said. "Hey Fara, you making that porridge for lunch?"

"You don't even know what's in that alien slop," Kaal said.

"Whatever it is, it's good." Starks said with a shrug.

"Eggs," the Kelrodoan said. "Fara must harvest more."

Before Starks could say something, klaxons started wailing and the pilots looked up.

"Look sharp, gentlemen," Shea said.

"Briefing in five minutes. Fara -"

The Kelrodoan was already bringing Shea's boots, scuffing irritably at a theoretical spot of dust.

"I hope Kaal didn't offend you. Fara," Shea said.

"Fara did not listen," the Kelrodoan said, fitting a boot onto Shea's foot. "You Empire-men are strange warriors."

"How's that?"

"You kill without looking your enemy in the face." Fara said, looking at the sky. "It is a new path to honor."

Shea frowned, but the Kelrodoan had turned away, and the briefing awaited.

* * *

"Bandits incoming!" crowed Starks to his wingmen. "Dibs! Rocket! Time to bump!"

As Sword Squadron's nine remaining V-wings roared across the parched plains of Kelrodo-Ai. Starks couldn't resist a gleeful barrel roll.

"Don't go fangs out now, Dagger Leader - you can flat-hat on the way home," Shea said from behind the gargoyle mask of his flight helmet. "Scimitar Leader, does your flight have objectives logged?"

"Copy that, Blade Leader." Kaal sounded annoyed. Shea knew Kaal had been at the briefing and read the intel, well aware that knowing it backwards and forwards could save his life and those of his wingmen. Stilt, as squadron chief, it was Shea's job to make sure no one had missed something obvious. Repeating the objectives so they wouldn't be forgotten once the shooting started was one way to ensure this.

"Intel pegs the emissions source as a near-vertical pipe behind the dorsal weapons emplacements," he said. "Confidence level that it leads to the main reactor tops 82 percent. The pipe is 25 meters wide - not much room to maneuver. Scimitar Flight, you're in rotation for first sortie. You good with that? My flight's happy to take it."

"Afraid I'll steal your close-up, Captain?" Kaal asked.

"You can have it," Shea said. "Okay, boys, we're going in-and we're going in full throttle."

Shea's astromech, Cutie, squalled a warning and Shea's board lit up with the red dots of incoming fighters.

"I count 30 bandits," Starks said. "Dagger Flight, let's latch!"

"Remember we're flying in goo, so maneuverability will be hampered,"

Shea warned.

Laser blasts streaked past his cockpit as the first wave of bandits shot overhead. Shea's heads-up display showed a motley mix of craft-Vulture droids rebuilt for organic pilots, battered Z-95 Headhunters, and snubfighters he'd never seen before. Sword Squadron's pilots vaporized four of the enemy craft on their first pass. The others turned sluggishly, wobbling as they pursued the streaking Imperial craft.

"Dagger Leader, splash this vapebait while we cover Scimitar Flight," Shea said.

"Copy that," Starks said gleefully. He and his wingmen peeled off to port, racing back to engage the bandits, while Shea and his wingmen drew alongside Scimitar's trio of fighters.

"Three clicks and closing," Shea said. "Check your telemetry, Scimitar Flight."

"It's all good," Kaal assured him.

Ahead of them, the guns of Kelrodo-Ai opened up, the concussive blasts of heavy laser cannons shaking the V-wings' hulls.

"Dial up your SA, boys," Shea said. "Those are anti-capital-ship cannons - they track slow but they'll melt your shields in a nanosecond. Take it down to the deck."

A moment later Shea and his wingmen were meters above the grass, the exhaust from the fighters ripping the thin soil from the rock and leaving massive plumes of dust in their wake. The vertical face of the mountain rose up before them, then shot past in a blur as the V-wings banked sharply upwards. They rocketed past the pinnacle of the Citadel of Axes, then corkscrewed back down through a withering pattern of laserfire. Shea's life-support systems pumped air into his flight suit to keep him from blacking out, and he grunted with the effort to keep his hands on the stick.

"Objective dead ahead," Shea said. "Looks like there's some kind of grating over the shaft. Take it out, Blade Flight."

"Copy that, Blade Leader," said Blade Two -a clone whose callsign was Amp.

Shea opened up with his wing cannons and the grating vanished in a blinding flash. So did Blade Three, who'd strayed into the sights of one of the tower's heavy guns.

"Lost Ahrens," Shea said with a grimace. "Scimitar Flight, target shaft is clear. Stay with me Amp - we're their covering fire."

"We're inbound, Blade Leader," Kaal said.

Shea shoved his protesting V-wing through a tight loop, raking the citadel's gun towers with fire. He had no hope of doing any real damage, but wanted to keep them busy. Below them, Scimitar Flight's three fighters arrowed through the web of defensive fire and vanished into the open mouth of the shaft.

"We're in the pipe," Kaal said coolly. "Any bandits on our six?"

"That's a negative," Shea said. In fact, his scope showed a quartet of enemy fighters pulling up and away from the shaft. "What are they

And then Kaal screamed.

LOSS OF SIGNAL, reported Cutie.

"Could it be a sensor gripe, sir?" asked Amp.

Shea cycled grimly through his scans.

"Negative." Shea said. "They're gone."

A pitted Vulture cut across his field of vision, forcing Shea into a loop that ended with the bandit disintegrating.

"Blade Two, Dagger Flight: abort," Shea said. "Scrub the hop."

An hour later Shea, Amp, Starks, Dibs, and Rocket were crowded around a datapad, staring at the recording from Kaal's prow camera. Nearby. Fara sat atop a outcropping, slowly lowering a sharp stick into the rock.

About 30 meters into the shaft, Kaal's recording showed the gray walls of the tunnel changing to a mottled pink and red, spotted with black dots.

"Rewind." Shea said. "And slow down the playback. "

Now he could see it clearly. The walls were covered with long, ropy appendages- appendages that erupted in a sudden spastic fury, filling Kaal's viewscreen before the transmission terminated.

"Some kind of biological entity," Shea muttered. "Amazing reaction time."

"Can't we drop bombs down the shaft, sir?" asked Dibs. "Or send missiles?"

Shea shook his head. "It takes pretty precise shooting to crack a reactor even when you can see it." he said. "As for missiles, what if it's a nonstandard reactor? Or there are jammers?"

"So we land ground forces,"

Starks said. "Take it from the outside."

"That will take forever," Shea said.

"And we don't have forever." He looked at the other pilots. "Right now it's a stalemate. We can outfly most everything they've got, but we can't breach their defenses."

Starks, he realized, was looking off

"Say, Fara, what have you got there?" Starks asked.

"Amp, play it again," Shea said, annoyed at how easily Starks got distracted. "Maybe we'll see something. Those black dots on the walls, could they be-"

"Eggs," said Fara.

"Exactly-wait. What did you say. Fara?"

The Kelrodoan had pierced a row of lumpy black spheres with his stick, and was using his long fingers to transfer them to a bowl.

"Eggs," he said. "For porridge."

Shea's eyes leapt from the outcropping to the distant mountain.

"Where did you get those eggs, Fara?" he asked. "I need you to show me - right now."

Fara blinked and pointed to the outcropping. Shea clambered on top, followed by Starks, and shined his light down one of the holes. It was lined with pink and red flesh, studded with black dots.

"Stang." Starks said with a whistle.

"To harvest, you must be slow." Fara said. "To not disturb the colony."

"How slow?" Shea asked.

Fara poked the stick into the rock, moving very deliberately. The pilots crowded around him. Fara looked up and suddenly the tube's lining shivered. A moment later Fara was holding a broken stick.

"Slower than that," the Kelrodoan said with a shrug.

Shea nodded. "Prep for immediate launch," he said.

* * *

"Starks, you're with me and Amp on the insertion," Shea said as the mountain loomed ahead once more. "Dibs, Rocket- splash any bandits who try to follow us."

Shea yanked on the joystick, stone and sky trading places as he spun the starfighter up the cliff face.

"Once we hit the pipe, kill throttles and fire brakes," Shea said. "Repulsorlifts only, all the way down. We'll have to crawl-best estimate is it's about 250 meters."

"Sir, what if there are defenses besides the colony?" Amp asked.

"That's why we have guns," Shea said.

"Insertion point's coming up."

Their astromechs cut the engines and fired retro-rockets a split-second after the V-wings passed through the pipe's fringe of twisted, ruined grating. They crept forward on repulsorlifts at a half-meter per second. The eerie silence was unnerving, but the agonizing pace was worse-Shea felt like he was bracketed in a dozen enemy gunsights.

The edge of the colony crept closer. Ahead of them, gelatinous black eggs nestled among pink tentacles. Shea heard Starks murmuring a prayer, and realized he himself was holding his breath. The nose of his fighter passed the first strands. Shea waited for them to whip forward and kill him.

Nothing happened.

He forced himself to exhale. Sweat was running down his face, impossible to reach inside his helmet.

"Cutie, anything so much as twitches, kill the repulsorlifts." he said. "I've got the reactor's central matrix. Starks, hit the north power regulator. Amp, hit the south.

After impact, the overload spiral should reach criticality in two and a half minutes."

"We're gonna have to crawl back out," Starks objected. "What if that takes more than two and a half minutes?"

"Let's hope it doesn't," Shea said.

The three V-wings crept farther down the shaft.

"I can see the colony's edge!" Amp said.

"Make sure you're clear before you throttle up," Shea warned. "Cutie, how long did it take to transit the colony?"

All three pilots saw the response:

137 SECONDS.

They were silent for a moment. Then Starks sighed.

"One Empire," he said.

"One Empire," Shea agreed. "We're clear-punch it!"

Acceleration shoved him back in his seat as the engines propelled his V-wing into a low chamber hewn out of the rock, its floor crisscrossed with conduits. To Shea's relief, they converged on the familiar bulb of a hypermatter reactor, twin towers bristling with circuitry on each side.

"There she is-hit it and quit it!"

Shea yelled.

Alarms began to wail in the chamber, and Shea saw battle droids gesticulating in confusion. He activated his proton torpedoes, bracketed the center of the reactor, waited for target lock, and thumbed the trigger. Before the torpedoes even went home he was banking to port and racing back the way he had come.

"It's away!" Starks yelled, as Amp's fighter turned to follow him.

"Cutie, give me a 150-second countdown to criticality," Shea said as shock waves buffeted his fighter.

Then they were back in the pipe, crawling towards that curtain of pink

120 SECONDS, Cutie reported.

Shea could see each tentacle, could count each egg.

His V-wing climbed with horrifying slowness. He tried to tamp down his panic, force his foot away from the throttle.

"Captain!" Starks cried. "In 100 seconds this kriffing mountain is going to be a cloud -of-vapor!"

"I know," Shea said. "Don't touch your stick."

50 SECONDS.

A low rumble began behind them. Shea stared at the tunnel walls, teeth clenched.

"Shea!" Starks wailed.

"Don't touch your stick."

30 SECONDS.

Sweat stung Shea's eyes.

"Ambient temperature's climbing,"

Amp reported.

Shea realized he was mumbling: "Come on baby come on baby come on come on...."

20 SECONDS.

Shea thought the walls were dark gray ahead, but decided that was wishful thinking. He looked again. It was true.

There was a muffled thud somewhere below them. Then another.

10 SECONDS.

The V-wings drew even with the final row of tentacles. Shea ignited his engines and stomped on the throttle, savage acceleration slamming him back in his chair. His vision blurred, he saw blue sky -and the mountain exploded.

His fighter was tumbling end over end. He clung to the stick, watching chunks of rock and machinery whip past the cockpit, hesitate at their apogee, then fall back out of view. Cutie was screaming and his instrument panel was solid red... but he was alive-as were Starks, Amp, Dibs, and Rocket.

"You thought you were a holostar before!" Starks crowed. "Wait till they get a load of Shea Hublin-the Slowest Gun in the Western Reaches!"

Back at the base, Shea decided that the pillar of smoke rising from the plain greatly improved the view. He extended a stocking foot towards Fara. The Kelrodoan had kept his boots immaculate.

"We couldn't have done it without you, Fara," he said. "No way I'm letting you go now-you're the most valuable valet in the whole Empire."

"The Empire-man is too kind," Fara said, turning away and spitting on Shea's boot. After a moment he began to scrub at a scuff mark.

"No, you earned the compliment, Fara," Shea said. "And now you're going to see the galaxy-or at least the rest of the Western Reaches."

Fara glanced briefly at Shea, then turned to gaze at the plains and skies of his homeworld, as if he were trying to memorize them. Then he blinked and returned to cleaning Shea's boots, face expressionless.

"Sir!" Starks yelled. "You have a priority incoming holomessage!"

"Patch it through," he said-then sat up. startled.

He'd never met the man whose image flickered before him. but the hawklike features were unmistakable.

"Sir, I'm honored," he stammered.

Moff Tarkin smiled. "The honor, Captain Hublin, is entirely mine."

Scouting Report SS-1 76.0 1,

Imperial Year One ...

"... Keog Boorn recording," the old scout said into his log pad, casually checking his words as they scrawled across the pad screen. "My survey of the uninhabited regions of Sluis sector continues, as per the details of my scouting contract with the new Imperial government. I'm investigating a regular signal which my sensors picked up on the second orbit of the planet Dagobah. It could be a beckon call, but the atmosphere's masking and distorting properties made a conclusive identification impossible from orbit. So here I am, slogging through waist-deep water as I try to follow a phantom sensor blip."

The scout paused, taking another reading from the portable sensor array strapped to his back. The signal he had been tracing faded in a shower of static. He made an adjustment, cursed loudly, then made another adjustment. The static cleared. He got his bearings, noting with a moan that the path of the signal cut right through a thick patch of bushes and *vines*.

"This swamp world is a dismal place, I'll say that much for it," Boorn said, continuing his report. "Looks like I'll need both hands to clear a path through the undergrowth. This log will continue when I reach the source of the signal."

Boorn clicked off the log pad's recorder and shoved the small device into one of his many pockets. He hadn't really wanted to land on this forsaken mud hole, but his contract with the Empire called for him to investigate the sort of signal his ship's sensors had received. What the new government wanted with detailed surveys of uninhabited worlds was beyond him, but the pay was better than anything the Republic had ever offered him. Funny, the Empire was barely a year old and already people around the galaxy were referring to the

previous government as the "Old" Republic. He laughed out loud at the thought. Old indeed! Look at this swamp, these ancient trees. This place was *old*. By the Great Spiral, did everything in this big galaxy need some kind of label? Since that was what he was paid to do, put labels on the unknown, then maybe everything did - at least the people in charge thought so.

The scout felt the change in the swamp before he saw the cave. The mist was a little thicker, the air a little more foul, the shadows a little deeper. There was an evil aura to the area, and Boorn felt his skin grow cold in response. He suddenly remembered the stories he had heard about Dagobah. Wasn't this the planet that the Bpfasshi Jedi fled to? The Bpfasshi *Dark* Jedi? He shivered, gulped, and instinctively placed his hand on the butt of his blaster. Another reading of his sensor pack confirmed his worst fears. The beckon signal which kept fading in and out of focus was coming from the malformed cave. The tree straddling the cave was a dark, twisted plant, its roots spaced like broken teeth *over* the mouth of the cave. He saw dark shapes moving between the roots, slithering and crawling *over* the tangled, moss-dripping tendrils. He took a step toward it, drawing his blaster. He took a second step, then a third. Then he heard the loud, terrifying howl.

It echoed out of the swamp, intensified by the fog and his own growing uneasiness. It was an angry, hungry howl. It was familiar, yet otherworldly, and Boorn suddenly had no desire to enter that dank *cave* or meet the owner of that fearsome howl. He stepped back, snapping open his log pad as his eyes darted back and forth. He spoke quickly, trying to keep his voice level. He didn't think he quite pulled it off.

"Boorn reporting," he stammered, "there's nothing here. Nothing but mud and fog and insects. The signal was a phantom - probably nothing more than an atmospheric disturbance or a sensor glitch. Dagobah's empty ... " He glanced at the dark *cave*. "... completely empty."

He snapped the log pad closed. The howl sounded again, and this time its echo lasted until he was safely back on his ship and lifting into space. As the scout ship disappeared into the clouds, a small green being stepped out from behind a tree. His long, pointed ears pulled back as he watched it go. Yoda smiled. His home was safe again, at least for a while ...

Grand Moff Tarkin's Data Journal

Personal Data Journal Entry #476, Tarkin recording

...

Meetings with Chief Designer Lemelisk continue to proceed smoothly. The man is as good as his reputation, and he has an uncanny ability to turn my visions into working prototypes. He truly believes we can construct an artificial satellite the size of a small moon. Of course, much of the satellite will consist of housing for the giant

power cells, engines, weapons systems and other machinery necessary to support living beings and actually move the sphere through space. Still, it will be huge! If the masses quake in fear at the mention of a single Star Destroyer, how much more fear will such an engine of destruction as our Death Star inspire?

My latest set of requests were met with excited joy. Bevel loves the challenges that I have set before him, and each new solution he devises makes the man absolutely giddy. I share his enthusiasm. I have asked for the following specifications be included in the final design:

- The Death Star must feature a single weapon of mass destruction. This weapon must emit energy of such a degree as to rock a target planet to its very core.
- In addition, the Death Star must include surface defenses rivaling that of the Imperial core worlds.
Planetary shielding, surface-to-air turbolasers, 360 degree sensor capability, powerful multidirectional tractor beams, and heavy cannons for use against capital class ships are not only necessary but vital to the design and mission of the battle station.
- The Death Star not only needs to move through normal space, but it must have the capacity to travel through hyperspace or it is useless to us. While hyperspace speeds need not be great since a planet would not be able to evade this station, it would be pleasing to achieve a moderate hyperdrive multiplier.
- Once operational, the Death Star must be self-sufficient. It must be able to produce its own vital supplies and to keep itself and its carried craft in working order, as its mission may carry it far from Imperial stores for long periods of

time. I await Chief Bevel's assurances that these design specifications will be met.

Boba Fett – Bounty #239

Bounty #239 is a paranoid scum. No surprise there. After making enemies in over a dozen systems — making deals, breaking them, selling tainted product, even letting some so-called friends take the rap for one of his own schemes on Corellia — that Bith slimo deserves everything that's coming for him.

Too bad no one told him that what's coming for him is me.

Taking this guy down won't be the usual walk in the park. He's taken that paranoia and used it to his benefit. Anyone who tells you that cheaters never prosper clearly never talked to this guy. The small army he's hired would bankrupt a Hutt. Aside from twenty or so garden variety mercenaries, he's somehow been able to acquire the "services" of those Trandosha twin brothers (the ones who gave me so much grief during that job on Ryloth) and a trio of IG assassin droids.

It'll take more than an EE-3 and a jetpack to get this done and get out in one piece. Those droids are shielded against ion weapons. Clone Wars-era droid poppers won't cut it on this run.

Finesse isn't in the cards. The way I see it, the only option here is to go big. Pack as much heat as I can carry, hit the compound with the proper combination of shock and awe, and leave that Bith poodoo as a big-eyed smear in the smoking ruin that he used to call a compound.

Attack On Doniphon

Audio recording made at Anglebay Station on Telos IV, Kwymar Sector, Outer Rim Territories, 17 BBY:

4A8-RA-7: RZ-179, are you awake? RZ-179? *Switching mode.* Sergeant? Sergeant Valance? *Switching mode.* Beilert?

Subject: What happened? Wh-where am I? The Imsoo?

4A8-RA-7: Sergeant Valance, do you remember the encounter on Doniphon?

Subject: Doniphon ...

4A8-RA-7: What is the last thing you remember, Sergeant?

Subject: Remember? I don't ... ah. Kriff it.

4A8-RA-7: You have remembered?

Subject: Rebels. They were dug into the Selpathian Hills, low on ammunition. We were on the plain, manning the AV-9. Somehow they got a transmission through the jamming. The rebels at Damatua sent starfighters.

4A8-RA-7: What model starfighter?

Subject: Split-wings. ARC-170s, maybe. Or some kind of Z-95. HUD never painted them with a positive ID. They came from the east, from behind. And then ... and then I don't remember. Why don't I...?

4A8-RA-7: The day before the attack, you cleared an outpost near the Pyrand River.

Subject: Something bad happened. Or I wouldn't be here in the Imsoo.

4A8-RA-7: The Pyrand outpost. You cleared tunnels beneath a warehouse. It was fighting at close quarters, Sergeant. Tell me about the rebels at the Pyrand outpost.

Subject: What's to tell? They were rebels. We terminated them.

4A8-RA-7: How were they equipped, Sergeant? What were their weapons?

Subject: Pistols. They had DH-17s.

4A8-RA-7: In what condition?

Subject: Condition? They were ... they were new.

4A8-RA-7: You are certain?

Subject: Yes. Some of them still had lubricant around the power packs. I noticed that. And the holsters. The holsters were new leather.

4A8-RA-7: You are certain?

Subject: I just said so, you kriffing tinnie. Why am I in the Imsoo? What happened to me?

4A8-RA-7: Did they say anything, Sergeant? The rebels?

Subject: Yes. We intercepted their transmissions, heard them yelling to each other.

4A8-RA-7: Did you notice any distinctive accents? Speech patterns?

Subject: What?

4A8-RA-7: Did you notice distinctive accents? Speech –

Subject: I heard you. I was thinking, that's all. My head is killing me. And my chest ... it's itching.

4A8-RA-7: Attention to your minor ailments can wait, Sergeant. Did you notice –

Subject: They weren't Rimmers. The officers, at least. They sounded like Core.

4A8-RA-7: Core accents, you mean?

Subject: Yeah.

4A8-RA-7: Were the accents the same, or different?

Subject: I don't remember. My head...

4A8-RA-7: What did the accent sound like? Was it Chandrilan?

Subject: Do I look like I've got a language module installed, tinnie? You want to research accents, you storm the next reb nest. Fill your little audio receptors right up to the top.

4A8-RA-7: *Switching mode.* That is all that will be required, Sergeant.

Subject: Wait a minute! When am I getting out of the Imsoo?

4A8-RA-7: This is not an Imperial Mobile Surgical Unit. You are at Anglebay Station on Telos IV.

Subject: Telos? Away from the front? What happened to me? To my platoon?

4A8-RA-7: A torpedo impact destroyed the AV-9. Your platoon sustained 21 casualties, 16 KIA. The rebels in the Selpathian Hills were terminated in a subsequent action.

Subject: And they took me to Telos? How long have I been in the tank? Is that why I have this kriffing itch? And why my face is numb?

4A8-RA-7: You have been here for 271 standard hours. You were not given bacta treatments because your prognosis was rated poor and bacta supplies were prioritized for higher-ranking personnel.

Subject: I haven't been in the tank? But I feel ...

4A8-RA-7: You betray no ill effects from the surgery.

Subject: *Surgery?* My face ... it feels wrong. *What happened to me? What were my injuries?*

4A8-RA-7: I am required elsewhere, Sergeant. Reports indicate you sustained substantial blast and burn damage to the left side of your head and torso. The relevant body components could not be saved.

Subject: What? My face!

4A8-RA-7: Sergeant Valance. Stop. The synth-flesh is a coating. It is not bonded to the cybernetic parts, and is slow to self-knit if flensed.

Subject: MY FACE! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY FACE?

4A8-RA-7: *Switching to external transmission mode.* Security, report to Patient In-Bay 27 immediately.

Subject: NO! NO! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY FACE? WHAT HAVE YOU –

Transmission ends.

Outlaw Battle Armour

"General Geen, General Geen, tell us a story of the ancient wars!" The children clamored around the old veteran as he walked across Salliche's forum. Geen stopped and leaned heavily on his cane.

"Yes, yes, but only a short tale."

The children cheered, following Geen to a nearby stone bench where he sat himself down and began his tale.

"Many years ago, when my grandfather's grandfather was a general in the Old Republic, there was a great marauding band of raiders who destroyed entire towns, killed many innocent people and stole riches beyond belief. They destroyed the entire spaceport on Wroona, and robbed the Vaults of Narner. Nobody knew who these terrible warriors were, because their faces were hidden behind the cold masks of their battle armor.

"And what terrible battle armor it was. Every arm bristled with blasters, every back had a jet pack strapped to it, and every helmet surveyed the battle with its targeting sensors and tracking computers. Trophies hung from ammunition belts and shoulder armor, and the multicolored breastplates were blaster-scored from numerous battles. Nobody was safe from these vile marauders."

"How did they stop these armored raiders?" one child asked.

"Ah, I was just getting to that," Geen replied with a gnarled smile. "Despite all their great armor and powerful weapons, these mercenaries were completely destroyed by a lone Jedi Knight called Soonis. Which only goes to prove that outward appearances can often be deceiving ..."

A History Of R5 Astromech Droids

Jhensara propped her feet on the console. Things couldn't be better. A paid-off starship, a full cargo-hold, and a promising destination. If only her nav computer agreed with her.

Alarm klaxons wailed, waking Jhensara out of her wistful reverie.

"Blast it," she cursed, "what now?"

She consulted her nav computer screen, but it was difficult to see it for all the smoke. Jhensara began to question the value of the bargain she'd received when she bought the ship.

Jhensara looked out of the viewport at the asteroid storm ahead. It didn't take long for her to determine that she wasn't in the Thrynka system.

The tired computer ran through its diagnostic cycle and spat impolite conclusions at her. Alluvial damper ... out. Lateral thrusters ... dying. Hyperdrives ... hyperdrives ...

Jhensara felt the need to curse again. She actually began to panic, but only for a moment.

"Artoo, Arfive, Arthree," she called. "You boys have work to do."

Obi-Wan **Recording**

Two days ago, on one of my walks, I came across the twisted, withered husk of a short desert plant that had grown in the shadows of a dusty rock formation. Yesterday I passed the same plant again and noticed it had flowered small white petals, flecked with dark gray. This morning, I was surprised to find the entire plant had vanished. Even though I knew some creature had probably eaten it, I felt a sense of loss that surprised me. And I thought of Asajj Ventress.

I've already written instructions for how to build a lightsaber. Now I find myself compelled to write something of the enemies who use them.

From what I remember from the history databooks, the Sith have wielded lightsabers for at least four thousand years. They were long believed to have been extinct until just sixteen years ago, when my Master and I duelled with an Iridonian Zabrak who used a double-bladed lightsaber. This Sith killed my Master, and then I killed him in self-defense.

Ten years later, my apprentice Anakin Skywalker and I duelled Count Dooku at the Battle of Geonosis. The leader of the Separatist movement, Dooku was a former Jedi Master who—we realized too late—had turned to the dark side. This was most unfortunate, not only because Dooku had been a revered Jedi, but also because he

was a master swordsman. Dooku escaped at the Battle of Geonosis, but not before he informed me that a Sith Lord was manipulating the Galactic Senate. Three devastating years later, I would learn that he was telling the truth. The Sith Lord was Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

About ten weeks after the Battle of Geonosis, Anakin and I had our first encounter with Asajj Ventress. She was a humanoid, hairless with pale skin, who wielded two lightsabers simultaneously. These lightsabers could also be joined at the handles to create a double-bladed weapon. Before she attacked, she told me that she had emerged from misery and suffering, only to find the Jedi she had once worshiped were nothing but "weak, misguided fools." She added that she agreed with Count Dooku: the galaxy was in need of a Jedi purge.

Asajj Ventress escaped that day, but not before she killed one Jedi and maimed his apprentice. It was obvious by her technique that she had received training from Dooku. Over the course of the Clone Wars, Anakin and I faced off against Ventress on other worlds. But despite all her fury and murderous inclinations, I always sensed something within her that distinguished her from the Sith Lords: an underlying fear. Mostly, it was a fear of being alone. And I sensed that there was some good in her, some part that had not been corrupted by Dooku. Where the Sith Lords were unquestionably evil, Ventress was simply a slave to the dark side.

Eventually, I learned some details of Ventress's history. She was born on Rattatak, an Outer Rim world so remote that it was unknown to the Republic. She was still a child when her parents were killed by one of the many local warlords. After a Jedi named Ky Narec became stranded on Rattatak, he found the orphaned Ventress and realized she was Force-sensitive. Narec trained Ventress as his apprentice, and apparently trained her relatively well, for together they defeated many criminals. Tragically, a group of warlords killed Narec, and rather than honoring the ways of the Jedi, Ventress sought vengeance. And once again, she was alone. Is it any wonder that she developed such a supreme hatred for the Jedi Order that "abandoned" her Master?

At some point, Dooku recruited Ventress as his enforcer for the Confederacy of Independent Systems. Even though Ventress had killed Jedi and other innocents, I managed to convey my hope that she might listen to reason and stop using fear to fuel her anger. She refused to listen. And I was still trying to reason with her when she nearly killed me on Boz Pity. She would have, too, had not Anakin's lightsaber dealt her a mortal blow. Her death, roughly five months before the Jedi Purge, did nothing to slow the Clone Wars, for by that time General Grievous—another of Dooku's disciples in lightsaber combat, if not the dark side—was already in command of the Confederacy's droid armies.

I'd thought that Ventress would use her dying breath to curse me and the Jedi Order. Instead she cautioned me to defend Coruscant from Dooku, for that was the key to victory. Indeed, Dooku and Grievous would assault Coruscant. She even allowed that I might have been right about her all along. And then she was gone.

Five months after Ventress's death, Anakin defeated Dooku in orbit of Coruscant, but we were unable to stop Grievous from fleeing into space. I neglected to mention that Grievous was a cyborg who had killed a number of Jedi and taken their lightsabers as trophies. He was capable of wielding four lightsabers simultaneously. All in all, a most unpleasant fellow. I defeated him on Utapau.

And then the Purge began. I would soon learn that I was among the few Jedi to survive, and that Palpatine had taken a new apprentice: Darth Vader.

In hindsight, Vader and Ventress had some similar characteristics. Both knew the loss of loved ones, and had reason to distrust the Republic and the Jedi Order. But when I finally caught up with Vader, I sensed nothing but pure evil about him. For unlike Ventress, Vader was not a victim of unfortunate circumstances. Yes, he had his struggles and his shortcomings, but he was not a weak being who feared abandonment. He was a powerful man who had been given opportunities to better himself, yet he only craved more power, and chose his own path, betraying the Jedi and becoming a Sith. He was my greatest failure.

My duel with Vader was awful in its savagery. In the end, he was more determined to kill me than defend himself, and was blind with fury when I felled him. I left him maimed and burning on the shores of a lava river. To have dealt him a killing blow might have been the merciful thing to do, but because I am a Jedi and not a cold-blooded murderer, all I could do was leave Vader to his fate. Had I killed him then and there, I believe I would have taken a step onto the same dark path that he had found so impossible to resist. But by leaving him for dead, I fear I failed yet again, for

I soon learned that Vader had survived, in a fashion. Like the late General Grievous, he is mostly machine now, a malevolent construct of pistons and gears, plastoid and wires, his mortal remains fueled by the dark side. The galaxy will never know peace until Darth Vader and the Emperor breathe their last.

It is hard for me to see what the future holds. Fortunately, I have my mission and my ongoing studies of the Force to help me be mindful of the present, as well as the daily rigors of survival on Tatooine. Whatever tomorrow may bring, I must be ready for it.

I have collected a small number of seeds from my desert walks. I think I will plant them and see what they will grow, in memory of Asajj Ventress.

15 bby

The Battle Of Kashyyyk

Orientation seminar conducted by Commander Gett, 41st Stormtrooper Legion.

Sometimes in the middle of a battle you discover you're fighting a different war than the one you started with.

The Separatist invasion of Kashyyyk had several military objectives. The Wookiee homeworld stands astride the lateral spacelanes linking the Corellian Run and the Perlemian Trade Route, and near the old Hutt routes to Coruscant. These vectors aren't as fast as the main trade routes, but we had those sewn up, so this was the bad guys' best way of outflanking us on the Rim, or getting into the Core.

Also, the Wookiees were rumored to know all sorts of secret routes – you wouldn't think it to look at them, but they're pretty fair hyperspace scouts. The Seps wanted them – and from what I heard so did our black-ops guys. And the Seps didn't like what the Wookiees stood for, either. Here's something Commander Gree read to us before the battle: *The natives of Kashyyyk have long been considered the representatives of the Republic in the brutal Mytaranor sector, on the edge of Hutt Space: a race of savages, surrounded by slavers and worse monsters, yet tamed by the influence of civilization, in one of the success stories of the Mid Rim.*

Tinny didn't like that, as we used to say.

The Seps already had a presence on Kashyyyk, thanks to Trandoshan pirates working for the Trade Federation. To properly conquer the world, however, General Grievous selected the city of Kachiro as his bridgehead. Kashyyyk is mostly wroshyr forest—good defensive cover, bad to land in—but at Kachiro, the shallow open water of the Wartaki Sea offered a good approach for a troop landing, and the lines of communication into the interior were excellent.

An invasion fleet was placed in orbit, and a droid army deployed to occupy the Wawatt archipelago, establishing a shield perimeter as protection against counterattack. The next phase was the conquest of Kachiro itself, a coastal assault against the mainland. For this, the Seps brought down a lot of repulsor gunships and snail tanks, supported by the usual infantry battle droids. The complex terrain made more-conventional armor unusable – neither their MTTs nor our AT-TEs were any good down there.

The initial defense of Kachiro was entrusted to a small battle group led by Commander Faie—a battalion of swamp scouts from the 501st Legion, a troop of Republic Commandos, and airborne light cavalry from the 7th Aleena Reconnaissance Regiment, backed up by the local Wookiee militia. They performed effectively, harassing and disrupting the Separatist troops, and making preparations for a mobile defensive campaign.

Instead, Grandmaster Yoda decided that the droids needed to be stopped outside the walls of Kachiro, a change of tactics that meant heavy casualties and necessitated the deployment of a larger army under Jedi command. The Republic mobilized the crack battalions of the 41st Elite—generally regarded as the 3rd Army’s best division—along with a full assault brigade from the 501st.

We arrived on the surface just in time.

The Sep assault on Kachiro was a simple frontal wave attack, the sort of thing that only the droid army could do well—armor and gunships storming the beaches and sea walls of the Wookiee city, backed up by droid infantry—*lots* of it. In response, Yoda deployed the 41st Elite in an infantry counter-charge, using the same tactics he had applied at Geonosis—and with similar results. The native auxiliaries, trusting in the Jedi and in their own heroism, went right along with the plan.

The battle turned in the favor of the Republic, but with heavy casualties—*unnecessary* casualties, perhaps. The Wookiees fought heroically, ripping battle droids apart with their bare hands until they got gunned down, and the

clone troopers—as always—did their best. But Master Yoda’s decision to meet the droid army in the shallows meant that our Juggernaut armor and AT-PT artillery couldn’t be deployed until the Seps had come ashore, over the bodies of our own dead.

I’m not even sure we really won.

At this point, we learned about the Jedi betrayal of the Republic. We had a mission protocol for this, and removed our Jedi officers from command. A number of Jedi were killed as they attempted to escape, but several did make it into the interior, killing Commander Faie and Commander Gree of the 41st. To make things worse, the surviving Jedi tricked the Wookiees into supporting them.

It took several days of confused fighting to restore order in Kachiro. In that scenario, all a commander can do is respond to trouble when it happens, and spread the word about the price of treason. I can’t tell you if any Jedi escaped, but when we went down to take a look at the Wookiee guild vaults, we found no trace of the navigational data that had brought the Separatists to Kashyyyk in the first place.

Even so, Tinny got his revenge, because the Jedi got the Wookiees to revolt, and Mytaranor became a real kriffstorm. I’m just a soldier, so I’m going to quote a book again. This one’s by Governor Tarkin, whom I’m sure you’ve all heard of:

They are a species bound by honor and the primitive nature of their thinking, and it has proved hard to persuade them to stop their sedition and serve the Empire. Initially, it was hoped that the beasts could be re-educated, but force—or the fear of force—seems to be the only language the average Wookiee understands.

It has been necessary to keep Kashyyyk in line with tight policing and a large garrison, with skilled Wookiees of working age relocated to offworld industrial centers. This has taught us an important lesson. With the correct application of coercion, even a misguided and violent species can earn honor by contributing to the New Order’s higher purpose.

This, then, is the position that the New Order has found for primitives deceived into supporting the remnants of Separatism. War is not a gentle business, especially the war against sedition and deception, and some of you may balk at

what is necessary—but it is necessary, for the good of the Empire, and to ensure peace and order for the majority. And it will be good for the Wookiees, too. Their labor in the Empire’s service will make them free.

I’ve been in war. I’ve fought Wookiees. The guy who introduced me to Tarkin’s writing, Commander Gree, got his head taken off that day on Kashyyyk. So what the governor wrote makes sense to me, and I’d suggest you cadets start believing it as well.

Grand Moff Tarkin’s Data Journal

Personal Data Journal Entry #476, Tarkin recording

...

Meetings with Chief Designer Lemelisk continue to proceed smoothly. The man is as good as his reputation, and he has an uncanny ability to turn my visions into working prototypes. He truly believes we can construct an artificial satellite the size of a small moon. Of course, much of the satellite will consist of housing for the giant power cells, engines, weapons systems and other machinery necessary to support living beings and actually move the sphere through space. Still, it will be huge! If the masses quake in fear at the mention of a single Star Destroyer, how much more fear will such an engine of destruction as our Death Star inspire?

My latest set of requests were met with excited joy. Bevel loves the challenges that I have set before him, and each new solution he devises makes the man absolutely giddy. I share his enthusiasm. I have asked for the following specifications be included in the final design:

- The Death Star must feature a single weapon of mass destruction. This weapon must emit energy of such a degree as to rock a target planet to its very core.
- In addition, the Death Star must include surface defenses rivaling that of the Imperial core worlds.
Planetary shielding, surface-to-air turbolasers, 360 degree sensor capability, powerful multidirectional tractor beams, and heavy cannons for use against capital class ships are not only necessary but vital to the design and mission of the battle station.

- The Death Star not only needs to move through normal space, but it must have the capacity to travel through hyperspace or it is useless to us. While hyperspace speeds need not be great since a planet would not be able to evade this station, it would be pleasing to achieve a moderate hyperdrive multiplier.
- Once operational, the Death Star must be self-sufficient. It must be able to produce its own vital supplies and to keep itself and its carried craft in working order, as its mission may carry it far from Imperial stores for long periods of time. I await Chief Bevel's assurances that these design specifications will be met.

13 bby

Personal Data Journal Entry #481, Tarkin recording

...

Chief Bevel has responded to my last set of design specifications with his usual speed and completeness. However, he has had to disappoint me in some areas, while in others he has outdistanced even my wildest hopes and dreams. He assures me that he can include a weapon he calls a "superlaser" into the final design. In fact, the entire sphere will be dedicated to the support and maintenance of this single weapon. Not only will it be able to rock a planet, Bevel claims that the superlaser will shatter worlds. Only asteroid ruins will remain after the weapon is trained upon a target.

However, to achieve such massive destructive power, I must lose all but the most rudimentary shielding capabilities. Bevel assures me that the surface-to-air defenses will more than make up for the loss. Moving the sphere will be accomplished through the use of massive ion sublight drives while in realspace, and through redundant hyperdrive engines for travel from system to system. Make no mistake, though. The Death Star will be slow. It will seem to crawl through the void between planets, and even in hyperspace it will be no faster than the most ancient tramp freighter. Bevel believes that he can get the hyperdrive multiplier down to three, but he warns me that it could be as high as five or six. No matter. It is fitting that targets of this station have an exceptionally long period of time to fear their ultimate fate.

Finally, he showed me plans to modify existing space station replication plants to create a supplies manufacturing center deep in the bowels of the Death

Star. The food will not be Imperial cuisine, but it will suffice to keep the crew healthy and content. There will be room enough to store a better grade of food for the command contingent.

12 bby

Journal Of The 501st

Kamino- Changing of the Guard

Officially, there never was a clone rebellion on Kamino. Unofficially, approximately twenty years after we were created, a special detachment of the Imperial 501st Legion was dispatched to Kamino, with orders to eradicate an army of clones that had been bred to take arms against the Empire. Our mission commander, an expert on the inner workings of Kamino, was a young bounty hunter named Boba Fett...

The bounty hunter left after the battle. He said something about tracking down a smuggler on Tatooine. After the Kamino uprising, the Emperor decided an army of genetically identical soldiers was too susceptible to corruption. Future clones would be bred from a variety of templates. Though the 501st itself remained pure, the rest of the Imperial Army gradually became more and more diverse. We never really got used to the new guys.

11 bby

Personal Data Journal Entry #493, Tarkin recording

...

The frame is in place above the planet! Bevel and his team have outdone themselves! The battle station will be 120 kilometers in diameter when complete, and Tagge assures me that it will be finished ahead of schedule. He has requested another shipment of Wookiee slaves because of their stamina, strength, and ability to work with high technology. I have approved his request. With the shield projector on the planet providing a secure environment around the frame, and with our other security measures, I see no snags that will cause delays. I am confident that the Death Star will be ready in time for the Emperor's impending announcement to disband the Senate.

10 bby

Personal Data Journal Entry #501, Tarkin recording

...

I have just completed a tour of the construction facilities, both on the planet and in orbit. The planet-bound plants are turning out components around the clock. It is amazing how much work can be squeezed out of the laborers. The taskmasters work them to the point of exhaustion, then bring in the next shift to pick up where the previous group left off. I was inspired by the tf'chniques the taskmasters employ to achieve such dedication.

Chief Lemelisk has made use of many standard Imperial designs in the Death Star. Not only will this practice make crew training that much easier, it also allows us to use factory-pressed parts wherever possible. Of course, even the most basic system has been modified by Bevel and his team, but at least they are working from existing technology. If they had to design each component as a totally new innovation, the project would take decades to complete. As it is, we are pushing dangerously close to the Emperor's deadline. I will have to speak with the taskmasters about stepping up production in the months remaining.

In orbit, I was treated to a tour of the Death Star. While it is still more frame and exposed guts than finished station, I could see the completed Death Star emerging from the metal skeleton. The size of it! I envisioned it, and still I am amazed at the reality of it all. It is like walking within the Caves of Corips, only instead of rock and soil pressing down upon you there is plastisteel and illuminated tubing. I watched as the work crew began to place the superlaser into the Death Star's gaping maw. I toured the command centers, and strolled down wide corridors. I cannot wait to stand upon the overbridge and feel the hum of the powerful engines. When that occurs, I will know that dreams can become real. When I boarded the shuttle back to my command ship, I did so with sadness. It is hard to leave the child that I have conceived behind while it is still in such a vulnerable and helpless state. I long for the day when my child shows its power to the galaxy. On that day, this proud father will smile as the galaxy trembles.

Dark Vendetta

"Come on, Corwin. Let's get moving!" Darrin Arkanian dragged his human companion after him as they moved through the shadow-drenched alley. Above them, the city spires of Coruscant stretched impossibly high, still visible despite the fact that it was the middle of the night. Running strobes and traffic beacons, starlight and the glow from an endless procession of garish advertisements and glowlamps bathed the city sprawl of Imperial Center in a dim, gray-white light. The alley itself was unusually dark, however; a number of the glowlamps that generally illuminated this particular walkway appeared to be malfunctioning.

The young human -- Corwin Shelvay -- stumbled, gasping apologies to the elder Sullustan. "I'm sorry, Master Arkanian... I just *can't*." Shelvay's voice was a hoarse, pathetic croak, and the youngster was gaunt, undernourished and wore the scars of a brutal Imperial interrogation.

"Calm yourself, Corwin. Remember your training," Arkanian encouraged. *"If you don't, we aren't going to make it out of here."*

Ahead lay a small courtyard, a tiny stretch of ground that was all that separated the pair from a transport station and, ultimately, the freighter that waited to get them away from Coruscant. "Once we meet Captain Rashh, we're as good as off-planet, lad," Arkanian said, hoping to coax Corwin to greater speed. "Let's hope he's punctual, eh?"

"I shouldn't worry about that if I were you, Master Arkanian." The voice that boomed from the courtyard dripped with menace. "I doubt very much that you will keep your appointment with the Rebel pilot."

The Sullustan Jedi moved toward the sound of the voice, quickly snagging his lightsaber from his belt. At Arkanian's action, a sardonic smile tugged at the corner of the newcomer's mouth as he in turn stepped from the shadows into the dimly lit courtyard.

Sketching a mocking salute, the black-garbed figure announced, "I am High Inquisitor Tremayne. I believe your young companion remembers me." Tremayne met Corwin's gaze.

Corwin had crumpled to his knees in response to Tremayne's presence, a low, feeble moan escaping from his cracked and bleeding lips. "No... not again..." he whispered.

"I am most impressed with Shelvay," Tremayne continued nonchalantly, as if discussing the weather or the results of a recent swoop race. "He withstood the most intensive interview I have ever conducted. I look forward to testing that resolve again."

Arkanian ignited his lightsaber, the blue-white blade humming as the Sullustan Jedi prepared to defend his student. "Don't go near him," he said, with a look of defiance clearly written across his non-human features.

Tremayne ignited his own lightsaber and launched a blindingly swift series of feints and attacks, though his green, shimmering blade was neatly parried by Arkanian's saber as the twinkling weapons thrummed and sparked in a violent dance of light.

"You're quite good, Master Arkanian," Tremayne remarked. "Perhaps even my better with a lightsaber. It is a pity, though, that you won't join me, alien."

"My ally is the Force, evil child," Arkanian shot back. "An ally that is easily capable of ending your reign of terror."

Shelvay watched in horror, unable to do more than crawl back into the shadows. He didn't see the armored figures skulking in the alley until they had pointed their Imperial-issue blasters at him and ordered him to remain motionless.

Tremayne had brought reinforcements.

* * *

The battle in the courtyard had reached a stalemate as the combatants circled each other warily. "*Enough!*" Tremayne shouted to the alley. "Troopers, kill the boy if the alien does not drop his weapon." Turning to face the Sullustan Jedi Master, Tremayne growled, "Your choice, *Jedi*. Surrender, and the boy lives. Resist, and he dies."

Reluctantly, Arkanian deactivated his lightsaber. "Let the boy go. He is of no use to you," Arkanian said quietly. "Free Corwin, and I will come quietly."

"I'm sure you will," Tremayne replied. In an almost leisurely movement, the High Inquisitor swung his lightsaber at the defenseless Sullustan. Arkanian fell to the ground, a shocked death gasp escaping from his lips as his deactivated lightsaber rolled away.

At last, Tremayne thought. *I have finally defeated a Jedi Master*. The High Inquisitor stood over the Sullustan, the human smiling with triumph as life fled from the fallen Jedi. "Well, *Master Arkanian*," he taunted, "it appears your journey has ended. And soon, your student will join you. Or perhaps," he added, a mocking smirk twisting his angular features, "he will join my Master. The Emperor may have use for someone as resilient as Shelvay."

Tremayne's triumph only lasted a moment. The High Inquisitor turned back toward Shelvay and realized that the haggard Jedi apprentice was no longer immobile. Tremayne felt a brief stirring in the Force -- a stirring tinged with the dark side. Shelvay stretched out his hand and Arkanian's lightsaber flew across the courtyard and into his grasp. With a harsh cry, Shelvay attacked, the blue-white saber blade hammering into Tremayne's hastily readied defense. .

Corwin's blade hissed like an enraged beast as it contacted the High Inquisitor's weapon and relentlessly pushed closer and closer to Tremayne's face. Attempting to manoeuvre away from the Jedi apprentice, the High Inquisitor prepared to sidestep and swing his own weapon at Shelvay's neck, a classic feint that Tremayne had perfected through months of diligent practice.

Tremayne barely had a moment to register surprise as Shelvay's blade arced in an unpredictable, unorthodox move, one for which Tremayne -- overconfident in his ability to defend himself -- was unprepared. Shelvay's blade severed the High Inquisitor's arm just below the shoulder, and then slashed across his face on its return swing, blinding him and sending him spiralling into pain, fear and darkness...

Tremayne could feel himself floating, a not altogether unpleasant sensation, save for the fact that it was impossible to tell which way was up. Opening his eyes didn't help matters; his left eye only registered a gray-white blur, and his right eye failed to respond at all. A burning sensation covered his face, and a cold, hollow ache engulfed his right shoulder. He felt himself succumb to

delirium, as if drowning in an inky black whirlpool, a vortex that seemed to pull him in and spit him back out...

...Into his mother's arms, shortly after his 15th birthday. The quiet, bearded man who had come to visit them had said Tremayne was gifted and could begin his Jedi training. His mother wept with pleasure and pride...

...As he proudly stood among the other Jedi students. He had been studying under Master Kylanu for three years and was pleased with his progress, though Kylanu had indicated some dissatisfaction with Tremayne's vanity. "A Jedi does not care so much about appearances, Tremayne," the Jedi Master admonished. "He cares about truth..."

"...And the truth is," the courier said during the private meeting, "that Palpatine himself is interested in weeding out the corruption that has begun to rot the Jedi ranks. And you, Tremayne, have been chosen to help him. Palpatine is quite convinced of your ability, your integrity and your loyalty. You shall train under his premier agent, Darth Vader..."

...Vader, standing like an obsidian statue in the main entrance chamber to one of his many private fortresses, welcoming Tremayne like a son. "The Jedi order is fading, Tremayne," Vader had told him, "and they are reluctant to allow newcomers like yourself to reach the full extent of their potential."

"I will teach you, Tremayne," Vader said, gently. "I will teach you all you will need to know to restore the Jedi Knights to their former glory. You will seek out the traitors, and together we will restore the concepts of order and justice to the galaxy..."

...And Tremayne was again pulled down into darkness....

* * *

Tremayne lay quietly on the medical bed, flexing his new cybernetic arm. He had recently seen his reflection. While the left side of his face was undamaged, the right side was horribly disfigured. The new implants made the grotesque wounds look even more fearsome. The medical droid revealed that Darth Vader himself had demanded the use of such unattractive prosthetics -- as a sign of the Dark Lord's displeasure over his student's failure. Reflecting on the battle, Tremayne knew he had erred, badly. Shelvay -- a mere *novice!* -- had

bested him, despite his years of training, a thought that made the High Inquisitor's anger burn even more brightly by the moment.

The medical bay door hissed open, and Tremayne felt an icy stab of fear deaden his mounting anger as Lord Vader entered the room. With a glance, the armored giant sent the surgeon droids and organic attendants alike scurrying from the room. An angry Dark Lord of the Sith is indeed a thing to be feared.

"My lord," Tremayne whispered, his head bowed, "I beg forgiveness."

"I am most *disappointed*, student," Vader growled. "You had a Rebel -- a potential Jedi, at that -- in your grasp, and not only did you fail to extract any useful information from him, you allowed his Master to rescue him, from the Emperor's throneworld, no less."

"I cannot understand it, my lord," Tremayne said. "Shelvay withstood a full Intelligence interrogation before I interviewed him. COMPNOR reported that he was physically depleted but mentally able to withstand their strongest probes. Even my most... persuasive methods failed to loosen his tongue," Tremayne paused, his voice dropping to a whisper. "He should have broken."

"Instead, he broke you, *Inquisitor*," Vader hissed sarcastically. "Broke you quite handily, if the medical reports are to be believed."

"Give me another chance, my lord," Tremayne looked up sharply, his remaining eye radiating shame and anger in equal measure. "I will crush the novice's spirit and bring his broken body to you as a trophy."

"Indeed?" Vader voice dripped with facetious amusement. "And what of Arkanian? Surely he will protect the boy."

"Arkanian is dead, my Lord," the wounded Inquisitor replied.

"Excellent. Arkanian has been an irritation to the Emperor for far too long. Fortunately for you, Tremayne, I am in a *forgiving* mood." Vader leaned forward, and the air in the medical bay suddenly seemed to crackle with menace. "Do not fail me again."

Bowing his head, Tremayne spoke, his voice hoarse with a mix of relief, rage and shame. "I will not fail, master."

Without another word, Vader departed, leaving the High Inquisitor to plan his next interview with Corwin Shelvay.

The Employment Test

The following story is excerpted from the Data Journal of Voren Na'al. It was related by Ephat Mon, who participated in the event.

When Jabba first conceived his vast and powerful criminal organization, he knew he'd need a lot of cheap muscle for protection, goons who would break heads without thinking twice about it, and who would not betray their employer. He needed creatures who were strong, vicious, loyal, and stupid. In short, he needed Gamorreans.

But needing Gamorreans and getting them to work for you are two entirely different things. These brutish mercenaries live by a strict code of honor which states that a Gamorrean will only serve someone who is a better warrior than he. Anyone who wishes to hire a Gamorrean must first defeat him in battle.

Now, Mighty Jabba knew that he would have no problem defeating a Gamorrean in single combat, but, considering the amount of Gamorreans that he wanted to hire, the fighting could soon become tedious. So the shrewd crime lord conceived of a plan which would not only secure him the services of a large group of Gamorreans, but would also earn him their eternal respect and admiration.

Jabba had a group of 12 likely candidates brought to his palace throne room to receive their "employment test." The Hutt's thugs ringed the room, the Gamorreans were herded into the center, and Mighty Jabba heaved himself off of his throne and faced his pig-like guests. His massive tail rose high in the air, casting a shadow over the Gamorreans. With great fanfare, Jabba's interpreter announced that the Mighty Hutt would take them on all at once!

But as the first of the brutes advanced, Jabba signalled him to stop. He clapped his pudgy hands, and a henchman brought out a handful of blindfolds. The Gamorreans bristled and made threatening noises at the henchmen, who wisely

scuttled around behind Jabba's huge bulk for protection.

The crime lord's interpreter then explained that this was the traditional Huttish way of doing personal combat — fighting by smell and touch and blind instinct. Among the Hutts, the interpreter explained, fighting with eyes uncovered was dishonorable and cowardly. Seeing Jabba allow himself to be blindfolded first, and not wishing to offend their prospective employer, the none-too-bright Gamorreans accepted the condition.

After all of the Gamorreans were blindfolded, the gong signalling the commencement of combat was chimed, and the Gamorreans advanced clumsily, swinging wildly with their axes and force pikes. Of course by then Jabba had slipped back onto his throne and 20 of his henchmen brandishing gaffi sticks and clubs moved in to replace him. Jabba's henchmen, who were of course not blindfolded, had little trouble pummeling the pig-like brutes into submission.

A cacophony of strange alien laughter surrounded the bewildered Gamorreans as they flailed wildly in every direction. Jabba's henchmen darted between the blind thrusts and slashes to deliver savage blows to the helpless Gamorreans. Most of the Gamorreans were easily dispatched, but a few of them, particularly the axeman, Ortugg, displayed remarkable endurance and determination, and by luck managed to down one of their tormentors. This was unfortunate, but Jabba reasoned that "that is the price you pay for good help these days."

When the combat was over, Jabba moved back into place, with a few cosmetic cuts and bruises added for effect. The blindfolds were removed, and the stunned and beaten Gamorreans gaped in awe at the giant slug-like creature who had singlehandedly defeated 12 Gamorrean warrior clansmen blindfolded. All nine of the surviving Gamorreans swore fealty to the greatest warrior they had ever known.

9 bby

Darth Vader recording

These creatures have become such an irritation that every time I see one I want to strike it down with my lightsaber. Be that as it may, I interviewed a Toydarian subject who showed a great amount of resistance to Force suggestion, up to the point that I

created physical discomfort. I found that they can be easily intimidated by a demonstration of strength. And it proved relatively simple to cause it to expire, merely by making its existence extremely painful. Ultimately, though it showed a great degree of willpower, it was no match for the power of the Force.

7 bby

The Lesser Evil

Lord Darth Vader strode out onto the *Devastator's* bridge, peering out the viewports at the planet Falleen below. He paused a moment, looking down at the surface, where, even now, an invisible plague was quickly spreading.

"Lord Vader," Captain Bolvan spoke up, gingerly approaching the Dark Lord of the Sith. "We have projections based on the information salvaged from the laboratories.." He began punching up numbers on his datapad, then passed the device to Vader.

Reports estimated the necrotizing bacterium would tear through the population like wildfire. Only a few hours had passed since the accident, but projections showed that – if action was not taken soon – that the plague would spread to every continent on Falleen. Vader handed teh datapad back to Captain Bolvan.

"Sir," the Captain offered, "If we requisition the ordnance from Project X271 in the Outer Rim Territories, we could incinerate the bacterium from orbit..."

"And annihilate every living thing on the planet," Vader interrupted. "No. The Emperor may still have some use for the Falleen."

"Lord Vader, there is no cure.." Bolvan pleaded.

“Captain,” Vader snarled, “You must learn when it is appropriate to offer you counsel. Now is not the time.”

A lieutenant marched up to Vader and Captain Bolvan, saluted and stood at rigid attention. “You requested my presence, Lord Vader?”

“Yes, Lieutenant Hija. Prepare for an orbital bombardment of Falleen – centering on the research facility and everything within 40 kilometers.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Hija spun around on his heel and marched off to carry out his duties.

Vader turned from Captain Bolvan to look out the viewport again. In a few moments, the land directly below would be ablaze with turbolaser fire. Thousands would die, but millions would be spared the effects of the bacterium. The bioweapon project on Falleen had not been going well....and in the end, all of this was a small price to pay for failure.

The King's Requiem

King Haxim sat on a stone bench, quietly contemplating his surroundings. The royal gardens stretched as far as he could see — not even a hint of a palace wall or tower appeared on the horizon. A nearby fountain gurgled a pleasant and random tune, while insects buzzed in the flowering trees nearby. Haxim breathed in the air — cool water, fragrant pollen, the scent of his finely scaled skin. He opened his eyes and drank in the verdant splendor all around him, representative of all the most beautiful natural features of his homeland.

King Haxim was waiting to die.

His heralds had told him of the disaster at the nearby Imperial research facility. They themselves had seen the results of the spreading bacterium, as they encountered the rotting corpses of lab technicians, lying in the doors of the bunker they had yearned to escape. The servants had told of riots in the cities as the king's subjects succumbed to the necrotizing plague. Haxim had already seen several of his palace staff infected, and the heralds had since perished of the disease unleashed by the Empire.

Unlike his subjects, King Haxim would not try to flee death — he knew all too well it would claim him soon. If the bacterium did not consume his flesh, he was certain the Imperial warships hovering high above would rain death upon them in a crude yet effective attempt to eliminate their scientific abomination. He did not want to live, for in his eyes there would be little left. Even if only his kingdom were ravaged, the land would forever be a blemish on the planet and the Falleen people.

His only hope for revenge was his son, Prince Xizor, who had left the planet years ago on his “pilgrimage” and never returned. The lure of the greater galaxy had ensnared him, consumed him with its luxuries and powers. Perhaps Xizor would use what he had gained there to avenge his beautiful homeworld's disgrace. A fitting purpose for one who so eagerly fled Falleen in search of greater glory, Haxim thought.

The king looked up past the budding trees and lazily curling clouds. There he saw the white slivers of Imperial ships. And from their bellies were blooming bright, green turbolaser flowers.

Only One of Her Kind

Guri entered Simonelle's workshop. Several worktables bore human replica droids in various stages of completion, but none were yet covered with the carefully grown skins. Computers lined the walls, programming the Verbobrain processors for the unfinished droids. Guri looked around at the electronic mess, picking up droid components from a workbench and examining them as a child would a puzzle.

Simonelle looked up from his workbench in a far corner. "Guri, you have returned," he stated, scratching the clump of beard tentacles growing from his chin and raising the micro-magnifying goggles from his eyes. "Have you displeased your master?"

Guri advanced, an icy glint in her eyes. "No, Simonelle, I have pleased Prince Xizor very much. He hopes his nine million credits have gone to good use."

"Yes, yes," Simonelle purred, setting the micro-magnifying goggles on the workbench. "As you can see, I've begun construction of others like you, Guri. The droids I built before you were so primitive. I learned so much when building you. You are unique."

"And I shall remain unique," Guri said. With lightning swiftness, she struck the engineer's head with her open hand. Stunned, the Ingoian stumbled backwards into a computer console. Guri grasped his neck in both hands and began to squeeze. Blood oozed from Simonelle's eyes, nose and mouth. In seconds, it was over.

Satisfied that she had carried out Xizor's orders, Guri let the body slump to the floor. "My Prince did not intend for you to lessen the value of his unique acquisition," she said. "I shall remain the only one of my kind. To create others with my abilities would compromise my utility to my master. That cannot be allowed."

Guri turned and stared directly at the security holocam in the workshop's corner. She gently removed the datacard recording the carnage and shut the unit off.

In a distant room, Simonelle stared at the vidscreen showing the broken Ingoian replica droid lying at Guri's feet. The screen went black. *At least she*

didn't vaporize the lab, he thought, running a hand absently across his neck. Not a very charitable way for a "child" to treat her "parent," but she had no choice save to serve Xizor.

If only the prince knew that his nine million credits had also been spent on another replica droid, this one an Ingoian

Simoneile rose from his chair, already planning where he would go into hiding and for how long..

After all, no point in faking one's own death, only to turn up alive soon after, ...

Grand Moff Tarkin's Data Journal

Personal Data Journal Entry #529, Tarkin recording

...

More reports of a growing rebellion come from a wide variety of sectors. I study these reports with some trepidation, for I see a pattern developing that hints of more than a few coincidental and unorganized uprisings happening simultaneously.

I fear that the rumors of a central rebel government may be more than just spacer talk. Perhaps the unconfirmed reports of rebel support in the Senate are even true. There is no hiding that Senators such as Mon Mothma, Harkon Dell and Leia Organa have voiced their displeasure with the Emperor's New Order. Still, I am not worried by these rumors of rebellion. In fact, I would welcome a rebellion!

The Death Star will make the Empire invincible, and the destruction of rebels and malcontents is exactly what it has been commissioned for. I look forward to demonstrating its power for all the galaxy to see.

6 bby

The Hearing

Transcript Excerpts From Expulsion Proceedings Against Cadet Mako Spince;
Final Session.

Members include Senator Simon Greyscale; Chief Technical Proctor Gandl
Vorkosigge; Physics Professor Lucinta Cal-Meg, Student Adviser; and, Academy
Dean Horace Wyrmyr.

Greyscale: What's the prognosis on the planetoid fragments anyway?

Cal-Meg: Not very good. The orbit still isn't stable either, so we don't know
how much will burn up on reentry.

Wyrmyr: Gone! The very symbol of the Academy is gone! Fifty centuries —

Greyscale: Thank you Dean Wyrmyr, we've seen the reports.

Cal-Meg: The placement was very precise if I say so myself ...

Wyrmyr: Enough, of this. He blew up a moon!

Greyscale: Well, that's what this proceeding is all about. Cadet Spince, do you
have anything to say for yourself?

Spince: (pause) That I'm really sorry ... and that I'll never do it again.

Greyscale: (Stifling laugh) That I'll believe.

Vorkosigge: Now listen here young man. This is your future at stake ...

Spince: I guess I miscalculated

Cal-Meg: You realize you could have vaporized the whole orbital lab when you
did this, don't you?

Spince: Well, not really. I collected only a few nanograms at a time — the
antimatter was scheduled for detonation any —

Vorkosigge: Detonation at the armaments range. Anything could have gone wrong!

Spince: — anyway. I took precautions.

Greyscale: Precautions, eh? Have you looked up in the sky lately?

Cal-Meg: And destroyed school property for a prank.

Wyrmyr: What would he care? Look at his transcript. You'll see what kind of attitude he's had here.

Vorkosigge: Exactly, we have holos of some of the "stunts" ...

Wyrmyr: Disgusting! Who programmed the food dispensers with gene lab samples?

Spince: Harmless ...

Wyrmyr: Who faked a broadcast of my own death during homecoming?

Vorkosigge: While the Dean was away on sabbatical.

Spince: We won; he should have watched.

Cal-Meg: (chuckle) That was pretty convincing, wasn't it?

Greyscale: All very fascinating, I'm sure. (Bangs hammer) Order! Order! Can we please get back to the topic at hand?

Wyrmyr: You're not just going to be expelled; you are going to prison, young man! To Kessel, if I have anything to say —

Greyscale: Respectfully, Dean, you don't.

Spince: Please, I realize the trouble I'm in, but ...

Greyscale: Cadet Spince, I know what you must be going through now. I was young once, too. Though, not this young, apparently,

Vorkosigge: The Security Bureau should hear of this. It's nothing short of terrorism.

Cal-Meg: Has the ISB checked the matter out?

Greyscale: They have and apparently he can be vouched for with regard to "unmutual" intent or anti-Imperial actions. The statements of both Cadet Solo and the "unidentified" witness have been verified with truth drugs.

Wyrmyr: Spince! You stay away from —

Greyscale: Dean! Please. However, in view of the solemn responsibility I have been charged with, I must concur with my colleagues, and recommend that you be summarily expelled from the Academy and banned from all future Imperial service. In light of your family standing, I shall further recommend that criminal proceedings be dropped.

Wyrmyr: I'll appeal this.

Greyscale: You have that right, but this proceeding is hereby closed. And ... Mr. Spince, I recommend you think about what happened here today. Seriously.

Move It Or Lose It

Vader's orders are to clear the abandoned structures from ALL of the planets on this list.

He doesn't want any more rebel scum using abandoned buildings as safe houses or setting up ambushes for our ground troops.

"But what will the citizens say when we start blasting their neighbor's houses? Won't there be political ramifications?"

"Did you hear me colonel? You have your orders. If you see a potential problem, then handle it! Are we clear?"

"As soon as you know what you are going to do, call me on the comm and let me know what you intend to do. I'd hate to have to "promote" one of your Lieutenant Colonels..."

"YES SIR!" Colonel Ekirk crisply snapped a salute to the Admiral.

After pacing back and forth for a few pensive moments, Colonel Ekirk sat down at his desk and started scanning his list of Imperial-approved contractors.

"Hmmmm....what's this?"

In a flash of inspiration, Ekirk punched a few commands into the terminal to confirm his thoughts and called the Admiral on the com-link.

"Admiral, I have a plan."

"I just reached my shuttle. Your plan better make me tingle with happiness Colonel! Bringing me the poorly thought out plan of a desperate man would be your last mistake."

"No sir. I have a sound plan. Not too long ago, an overly ambitious demolitions expert contacted me, hoping to be added to our approved contractor list..."

"Overly ambitious?"

"Yes sir. He likes to blow things up."

"Go on..."

"He has a small firm called *Galactic Vacant Building Demolitions* . They work with the *Hidden Daggers* to destroy buildings by aerial bombardment. Their ships have concussion weapons mounted on them so they can launch a bombardment from low orbit, destroy the empty buildings and quickly move on to the next system."

"This has potential Colonel Ekirk. I have one concern though. How will they identify which houses are truly abandoned? We don't want the Emperor to lose face with his citizens."

"That's covered sir. All we have to do is send out a propaganda message over the holonet. We'll send a broadcast spouting off something to the effect that the rebellion needs "the people's help." We can call it the G.V.B.D.M. or some other nonsense. Once the citizens finds out about the "Galactic Vacant Building Demolishing Movement", they will gladly help us identify abandoned structures.

We'll also transmit the real message to our own troops who are already tracking empty structures. Then this crew will come out of orbit, demolish the building and move on to the next one."

With a stern voice, the admiral put Colonel Ekirk to the test, "And how will you avoid rebel propaganda from labeling this a covert operation and turning it against us?"

"I've already covered that too Admiral. The regional governors will be ordered to reward citizens for their efforts. Some will receive merit badges and others will be rewarded with items we've confiscated from smugglers. It won't cost the Empire a single credit and our Imperial Information Council will make sure news of the Emperor's generosity is all over the holonet.

"Excellent plan Colonel Ekirk. Make it happen."

Ando: Planet of the Walrus Men

ARCHIVIST'S NOTE: Mon Calamari freighter pilot "Slick" Sissalik worked as the slave valet for a wealthy and cruel Imperial water merchant on Tatooine. The Mon Cal was forced to assassinate his master or face dehydration under the twin suns.

Sissalik's recently published journals describe his escape to Ando, the Aqualish homeworld, where he would eventually play a pivotal role in the planet's history. The sea-level viewpoint of the newcomer describes an ocean world of floating towns and pirate gangs that remained wild, violent, and low-tech even under the oppressive thumb of the Empire.

Sissalik of Mon Calamari's Personal Log

3rd Day of Freedom

I have no regrets over the death of Farvakine. My treatment at the hand of that foul water-seller gave me no choice. He didn't suffer, however much he deserved to. The chuba poison simply built up in his system until it triggered

one massive stroke. I do admit one regret - - my approach vector allowed me to elude detection when I brought her in, but then I had to sink Farvakine's personal shuttle in the shallow sea several kilometers outside Quantill City. That shuttle alone, he never failed to remind me, cost him fifty times what he paid for me. I could use the money, but it would trigger too many questions I couldn't answer. But no matter. Goodbye, sandy Tatooine; hello, mercifully wet Ando. I called this place home for several years during my youthful education, and now I hope I can call it sanctuary.

It's certainly not Mon Calamari, but at least Ando is familiar. The moist air and open waters, shallow as they are, do my heart good. After the swim into town, I'm beginning to shake the health problems Tatooine wreaked on my system, even if those murky waters were probably polluted.

Yes, Ando's smell has changed for the worse in a very short period of time. Amid the industrial stink, you can sense a growing unrest in the humid air. The Aqualish are proud - - some say belligerent, but that's just the way they evolved - - and I suspect they won't tolerate the Empire's oppression and exploitation for much longer. It's probably only the natural Aqualish respect for strength that's kept the population from open revolt. The waters of Ando don't just hold floating Aquala homes and massive raft cities; they contain the very livelihood of the Aqualish people. As we say on Mon Calamari, swim where you want, but excrete in your own pool. The Empire's been excreting into the Aqualish pool for years, and if my guess is right, they might have a revolt on their hands soon.

Not that the Aqualish could really throw off the Empire, if the Imperials are determined to hold the planet. Technology on Ando is antique by Tatooine standards (they never bothered to develop anything better than the machinery they stole from ancient Republic scout ships millennia ago, which they faithfully duplicate to this day). Besides, despite their hatred of the Empire, the three breeds of Aqualish - - the Aquala, the Quara, and the Ulaaq - - are much more likely to go at each other's throats while planning their rebellion. They're just wired that way. The fin-handed Aquala live on the oceans and don't trust anyone who spends too much time on land. The fingered Ulaaq and Quara, for the most part, stay packed onto what little land there is, feeling bottled up. But it's easy to tell those two land-based breeds apart - - the Ulaaq have four eyes, while the Quara have two, just like the Aquala.

I've taken refuge in a dingy cantina on the docks of Quantill that seems devoid of Imperial presence, but it's often hard to tell. The Quara have a reputation for collaboration, and Quantill City is the biggest land-based population center on Ando - - definitely Quara territory. Though I'm a wanted murderer, I think I'm relatively safe for now. And the water's not the freshest, but they've got decent fried clawclams.

The Imperial presence will definitely prevent me from leaving soon. Stormtroopers seem to be concentrated on Ando's few land masses and a small fleet of oceangoing interdicator craft. The rest of the Aqualish homeworld is the same as ever - - seedy criminal districts never close, all manner of vessels and floating platforms litter the oceans, and mineral-fishermen sail the open seas, congregating in raft villages that the Empire mostly leaves alone. I salvaged enough credits from Farvakine's desk to get by for a few weeks if necessary, but the sooner I find work on a fishing vessel and disappear, the better.

Someone looking for an experienced deckhand (or better yet, oceanographer) is bound to wander into this dive sooner or later. I've just got to be patient and alert. Maybe I need more clawclams.

6th Day of Freedom

On Ando, job interviews are usually packed with insulting banter, verbal challenges, and fisticuffs, but I didn't have time for Aqualish formalities. Once the one-eyed Aquala trawler captain described the job and how utterly unsuitable I was for it, I simply told him to shut up and hire me before I fed him his wooden leg. For a second I thought he was going to tear out my barbels, and then he chuffed with the distinctive sound of Aqualish laughter. It seemed the direct approach wasn't what he'd expected from a "fish-eye" like me. I escaped with a bruised jaw and the job.

The Nanda's Luck should be at sea for several months, and the water and honest work will help me recuperate while on the lam. Captain Bippi - - it's actually "Bipopa Bogzider," but he'll insist you never use his full name right after he gives it to you - - doesn't pay oceanographer's wages, but he keeps his crew fed, he allows liberal use of communications and computer equipment during off-duty hours, and every sailor from the lowliest deckhand (that is to say, me) to the first mate gets a one-bottle ration of decent Aquala cuttlewine every week.

When we return to port at the end of the season, the Captain will pay us all a sliver of a fraction of a percentage of the mineral profits, factoring in seniority. One of the fish gutters said he cleared a thousand credits on his first trip alone, which would be fine by me. It's a simple but effective management technique that ensures hard work, loyalty to the ship, and what Iskalonians call "school spirit." It's frankly not very Aqualish of him, but then he's not all the Aqualish he used to be.

The Captain wears a painfully archaic and bulky cybernetic replacement over his right eye socket, a mechanical hand that I've already seen fitted with at least three different attachments since sunup, and, judging from his pronounced limp and stiff gait, an artificial leg.

11th Day of Freedom

Finally, after five days on the open shallow seas of Ando and three traveling with a loosely banded fishing fleet, we've made our first major catch of our trip - - three good-sized mineral-fish just shy of a meter in length each, and a half-dozen smaller "stone-fins."

The creatures are quite remarkable, and I studied them extensively during my time as an oceanography student. Using a process that's still not clearly understood, the "fish" (actually a species of swimming crustacean) feeds off rich ore veins that line deep undersea caves inaccessible to even the most determined Aquala. The mineral-fish takes the nutrients it needs for energy and uses the leftover metals to create a thick exoskeleton with an armored carapace and a snapping beak that can take a being's arm off if he's not careful. Fortunately, gravity makes them quite slow and easy to dodge outside the salt water. Fishing vessels like the Nanda's Luck usually process a catch the day it's brought in. Deckhands, myself included, knock out the snapping crustaceans with heavy stun batons powered by the ship's generator (their shells are tough but conduct electricity quite well). Then the gutters crack and clean the metal shells, scanning them for exact metal composition and storing them in the ship's hold.

Storage can create problems with pirates on the high seas during long trips. A vessel with a full load sits deep in the water and makes a tempting target. Yet unloading cargo daily is impractical. Hence the tradition of the sand-load: Fishing boat crews leave port with a hold full of sand that they

gradually dump overboard as they take on mineral-fish shells, making it impossible for pirates to tell whether a low-riding vessel has just left the dock or has wrapped up an expedition of several months. Representatives of Ando

On a water world like Ando, metals already have inflated value, but the metal taken from mineral-fish would be expensive even in the Core. Not only are mineral-fish shells harder than plasteel, they're also resistant to energy weapons and never corrode except in the most acidic environments. It is no understatement to say that the mineral-fish industry drives the entire Andoan economy. My fish-gutter friend claims to have seen Humans (no doubt Imperials) among the fishing fleets with illegally modernized vessels that take in dozens of mineral-fish in one day. Rumor has it the Empire is hunting for the secret of the mineral-fish's natural ore refinement process, but it seems just as likely they're simply doing what they always do: Stripping a subject world of its resources for the "greater good" (and greater treasures) of the Empire. I hear a single meter-long mineral-fish can be worth 10,000 credits.

No one would confuse our intrepid ship with an Imperial boat. The Nanda's Luck is a good-sized traditional fishing vessel with a hull made of pressed and treated Andoan swamp cedar that Captain Bippi claims covers a sturdy skeleton of mineral-fish armor. The sensitive fishing sonar, a primitive navigation computer, comm systems, an emergency repulsor engine, metallurgical scanners, the ship's light defensive shields, and laser turrets mounted fore and aft are the only modern technology on the boat (though the Empire bans weaponry on Aqualish spacecraft, sea vessels are under no such restriction).

One more thing. I've picked up a nickname from Captain Bippi - - "Slick." He insists it's because of an unfortunate incident involving some fish guts and an unswabbed deck that happened to me on my first night, but I suspect he just has trouble wrapping his tusks around my name. I'm getting used to it, though, and I think I'm growing on the Captain. The old codger hasn't threatened to dump me overboard for days now.

95th Day of Freedom

The fishing expedition of the good ship Nanda's Luck is nearing its end, and I plan to sign up for another tour after Portage Moon. I think I'm finally beginning to feel truly at home on this brackish, alien ocean, aboard this

tiny ship.

99th Day of Freedom

Today we set out from the raft-village of Natamee after a two-day shore leave. I welcomed the return to open sea; I could have sworn more than once that I'd spotted a Human staring my way just a little too long. There's no telling how deep into the fishing industry the Imperials have gotten, so both nights I slept in my bunk on the Nanda for safety. And so it was that I was one of the only hands alert (and sober) enough to make a record of our encounter with Pyash Yopayomba, the pirate queen of Ando.

She struck just after dawn. Captain Bippi was dragging the nets, but he must not have expected much activity - - he'd allowed more than half the crew to sleep off the weekend. The others were suffering through motion-enhanced hangovers in the mess. Only Bippi and I were on duty, Cap at the helm and I in the crow's nest. The ocean was eerily clear, with not even another fishing boat visible for hours. I was close to going down to the mess myself for some skillet-roe when I spotted a black dot on the horizon, rapidly growing in size. I made out black sails, but the ship had to be running on repulsors as well. No sailing ship could possibly move that fast. I scrambled down the mast to man the forward cannon as I sounded the combat alarm.

As the black ship skimmed toward us, I saw that it was in fact not a sailing ship in the traditional sense - - what I'd mistaken for sails were enormous repulsor fins. Even at its current velocity, the ship probably wasn't even running at half-speed. Her first volley of lasers missed us by sheer good fortune when a swell pushed the Nanda's Luck out of the line of fire. At Bippi's order, I drew a bead on the starboard repulsor fin and returned fire. Blue lightning sparked around the black ship - - even through the cannon scope, I still hadn't seen any crew on deck - - and it actually sped up. Her next barrage singed my scalp and cut directly through the bridge. But would Yopayomba mess with Ponda Baba?

I split my attention between the blast and the black boat. Had Bippi survived? I left the cannon and found him bleeding but alive amid the wreckage of the bridge, and I told him to keep his head down. That rescue attempt saved my life, for the black ship's next two shots turned the Nanda's cannons into slag. A thud reverberated through the hull as a heavy grappler

sunk into our good ship's hull. I shouted the alarm: "Prepare to repel boarders!"

They swarmed the deck within minutes, easily three pirates to each of us. Still, we were protecting our home and joined the melee with three times the ferocity. We stuck with our knives and vibroweapons; blasters were useless in the close-quarters fighting. We might have sent the buccaneers back to their accursed ship had not the pirate queen chosen that moment to join the battle personally. A singing vibroblade gleamed in the morning sun, a shine that soon glowed red with the blood of my crewmates. She was a whirlwind dressed head to toe in black, a fingered Quara female dealing death on a whim. She was Pyash Yopayomba, and no one on the Nanda could hope to defeat her, not even the Captain. But I had to try.

99th Day of Freedom

My "duel" with Pyash Yopayomba lasted all of ten seconds, the time it took her to disarm me and pin my hand to the deck with the tip of her blade. My head was sure to join it within moments, and I rolled my eyes around to look into the face of my killer.

The pirate queen was a sight. She stood over me, her black uniform drenched in the blood of two dozen Aquala sailors - - my friends. The morning sun glinted on her shiny blue-black pate as the Quara drew back a five-fingered hand and wiped a spattering of scarlet from her tusks. She wrenched her blade from my bleeding palm and prepared to strike the deathblow.

"Stop!" I heard a rasping Aqualish voice shout from behind me. I heard a clatter of shifting rubble as Captain Bippi staggered to his feet to face the Quara that had destroyed his livelihood. Yopayomba pinned me to the deck again and watched the injured Aquala step forward. "Enough of us have died, Slick. Yopayomba - - don't deny it, it has to be you - - our cargo for our lives? Leave these last few alive."

After an eternity, the pirate queen finally spoke. To my surprise, she addressed me, not the captain. "One called Slick," she said, "You, at least, have courage. I respect that." She turned to Captain Bippi, while still holding me fast to the deck with the vibroblade. "Captain, I accept the terms. In fact, my men will repair the damage to this vessel, and some of them will replace the brave sailors you've lost today. I have one added condition,

however."

"Yes?" Bippi snarled, rage simmering beneath his defeated exterior.

In a flash, Yopayomba's blade had left my palm and flew like a laserbolt into Captain Bippi's throat. He staggered to his knees and collapsed in a twitching heap, bleeding out on the deck. "Those who work for me do not surrender. Ever." She retrieved her vibroblade from Bippi's corpse and leveled it at my right eye. "I don't trust Aquala, and I trust Quara even less. I have no opinion of your kind. If you want to take another breath, you work for me now... Captain Slick."

Didn't see that one coming.

6th Day of Servitude

It's my sixth day as Captain, but the title is little more than a paper crown. I take my orders from one of Yopayomba's men, a particularly smelly Quara who is in constant comlink contact with the pirate queen. We should arrive in port within the hour. From the outside, I imagine Nanda's Luck looks like any other cargo-laden fishing boat headed home for the year, ready to join the rest of the planet in the month-long celebration that is the Portage Moon Festival. But our cargo of mineral-fish shells is long gone, replaced by tons of explosives.

I should have let her kill me. This mad plan of hers is suicidal anyway, and the blood that will be shed by future generations of Aqualish is going to fill the seas. I can't believe she's so deluded that she believes the Empire will grant her supreme control of Ando's oceans if she starts a new civil war between the Aqualish races, but she claims to have a promise from Governor himself. The plan, as she explained it, is simple. The Nanda sails into Quantill City harbor, kicks in the emergency repulsors, and rams into the port authority terminal, taking out the terminal, the boat, and probably a good deal of the city - - which right now is packed with revelers there to begin thirty days of feasting and celebration. Pre-planted evidence makes the entire mess look like the work of racist Aquala extremists, and off we go: a planetary civil war masterminded by the Empire, launched by a pirate and her Mon Calamari dupe. I won't go through with it. I've found a way to access the Captain's manual bridge controls without letting Yopayomba's men see it. Bippi never completely trusted the electronic helm controls, so I should be able

to shut down the electronics and use the manual stick to steer and control our speed for at least two minutes. As long as the bridge cabin door holds, that should be plenty of time to turn the Nanda around and aim it straight for the Majestic.

I fear this will be my last journal entry. I'm going to seal this log in a cuttlewine bottle with an open comlink. Maybe if the Aqualish understand how close they've come to a worldwide war, they'll try to show a little more unity. Maybe, with time, they really will try to throw off the yoke of oppression. Wish I could see it.

By His Own Hand

Look at the stars. They have been out there forever, hanging like diamonds upon the ebony velvet of space.

The stars were there when the Old Republic reached for glory. They waited, turning their sparkling lights inward when the Republic reached too far and collapsed from its own sanctimonious weight. They cheered when the Senate practically begged Palpatine to take control of the Council. Then the stars watched admiringly as the President used subterfuge, bribery and terror to name himself Emperor.

And I watched, too.

My name is not important, as all that I am is dwarfed by the bright darkness that is the Emperor. But I have always been near him, a servant, a happy slave. It is sufficient enough for me to be close to his power, to feel it reach out to me.

That is all I ask for. That is all I am granted.

The stars. I stare beyond the porthole and view their glory. They are all *his*. More glorious still, they are his by his own hand.

The Emperor.

It has a certain ring to it, that majestic title.

Emperor! The weak Republic had crumbled, but the Empire burns with a fire that will never be quenched. Nothing can destroy the Emperor's glory or his glorious reign.

The Emperor has taught me what others refuse to believe: the dark forces are strongest. He knew it all along, even back in those days when he was a lowly senator. And he has shared that knowledge with me.

Have you seen ambitious officers betray their superiors for inconsequential favors? Have you heard the secrets of local governments and how to bypass their defenses from the lips of weak-principled functionaries? Have you known sadistic gangsters, power-hungry politicians, greedy landlords? Then you know the truth, too — everyone craves the darkness.

The Emperor has simply recognized this truth. And with recognition comes utilization for his own aggrandizement. For he is the black center of the Empire.

He is the Emperor. He is the galaxy.

And I, like so many others, are content to serve in the shadow of his dark fire.

The Business Merger

Howzmin let Sprax into Xizor's office as soon as the Vigo arrived. The summons from the Underlord of Black Sun had been sudden, but the Nalroni knew better than to delay his departure, even if it meant curtailing his own endeavors for a time. Xizor did not tolerate delays.

Sprax went down on one knee before Xizor, who was sitting on his throne with his eyes closed, meditating.

The Falleen's eyes opened slowly and he looked at the kneeling figure. "Rise, Vigo Sprax," he said in his clear and beautiful voice. The Nalroni rose. "A matter has emerged which requires resources which I know are at your disposal."

Sprax's brow kned inquisitively. "Of course, my Prince. My place is not to question, but to obey," he replied. "What are your wishes, master?"

"As your own intelligence has reported RenTrans, a shipping company with growing concerns here within the Core Worlds, has come to my attention," Xizor began. "I have already approached the owners, the Rendar family, about joining forces and becoming a subsidiary of my own Xizor Transport Systems. However, they have been somewhat ... unwilling, shall we say ... to consider the benefits of a merger. That must change. So I'd like you to help make up their minds, one way or another."

"Ask, and it shall be done," Vigo Sprax said.

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"Ask, and it shall be done," Vigo Sprax said.

"You have access to several operatives," Xizor continued. "Experts in the field of starship repair and modification, as well as security systems. See to it that these experts arrive here on Coruscant immediately, in the usual discreet fashion, with no traceable connections to business affairs of your syndicate or mine."

"You're intentions are not always clear, Prince Xizor, but I shall obey."

"I shall entertain your curious nature, Vigo Sprax, because you are, in many respects, worthy of a certain degree of my trust," Xizor said. "In one week, the RenTrans bulk freighter *Doriella's Mystress* will lift off from docking pad RT209, at the starport facilities right here on Coruscant, near the Imperial Complex. Your operatives will see to it that its control and drive systems are tampered with, in a manner that will make the ensuing crash seem like an accident. Have the unfortunate freighter plow into some building complex nearby. Some extra detonite charges to encourage the ship's main power core to blow upon impact would be most convincing."

"And if this little display doesn't convince RenTrans to merge with XTS, I'm sure the irate Imperial administration, or perhaps even the Emperor himself, can do my work for me. What a pity it would be if the Rendar family were disgraced and its business assets seized and awarded to its chief competitor ..."

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5 bby

Smoke 'em Out

Inside the war room on a Star Destroyer, in an undisclosed location...

"The Emperor was not very happy with the results of our last attempt at cleaning up the planets. Col. Ekirk failed us in ensuring that all vacant houses and structures were destroyed last year." Admiral Brady continued, "Failure is not an option this year, gentlemen."

"The Empire has learned that Rebel Forces have been making use of the vacant structures as meeting places, hideouts, and as weapon caches." Admiral Brady stood and spoke calmly and sternly, "We were too soft on the Alliance in our previous effort. We must destroy these buildings and reveal to the people of the galaxy how weak the Rebel Alliance has grown!"

"Excuse me, Admiral Brady?"

"What is it, Col. Hoot?"

"I don't mean to interrupt, sir, but I need to excuse myself momentarily to take care of an urgent matter. I'll be right back."

"You are excused."

Just outside of the war room, in an empty hallway, Col. Hoot makes a call on his secure commlink to a Rebel base on a distant planet...

"Base One, this is Patriot One, over."

"Patriot One, this is Base One, go ahead."

"We have a problem. The Empire is going to make a more aggressive move against the vacant structures littered around the galaxy. In effect, they're attempting to smoke us out of our hiding places."

Col. Hoot continued, "General, we need to mobilize our own people and get them to vacate and destroy as many of these buildings as possible before the Empire gets to them. We must not let the Empire

discover and destroy our hideouts and any weapons and materials we have hidden at these locations.

"If the Emperor offers any rewards for destroying vacant structures, I'll figure out a way to make sure our friends receive them as well."

"Very good, Col. Hoot. I knew placing a spy high within the ranks of the Imperial army would pay off," General T. Morrow confidently responded.

"You'll need to make sure you also inform our contacts within Jabba's palace and any neutral citizens looking to make a profit as well. This is a direct aggressive move against the Rebel Alliance and we need to make sure we are prepared. Patriot One out."

Back inside the war room, Admiral Brady wraps up the meeting...

"In an effort to inspire some of our less than ambitious troops, we will be offering rewards for the amount of vacant buildings each person personally destroys. Because the Emperor is feeling generous, he is also going to not only award badges to those who participate, but items from his own personal collection.

"Go now and destroy these vacant structures. Find the Rebels and destroy them! For the glory of the Empire!"

"We'll see about that," Col. Hoot coolly whispered.

"...and Leebo Makes Three"

The Rodian glanced around The Nexu's Den as if looking for someone he desperately hoped not to see. Sitting across from him at the dimly lit corner table in the seedy port bar, Dash Rendar absently wondered why he even bothered trying to see-the air was a bilious pall of deathstick smoke and other inhalants, all designed to make the present more interesting and the future less attainable. His lungs protested in spite of his shallow breathing.

Aside from the smoke, the place smelled like stale droid lube and fermented fruit. He'd been in worse. It didn't seem anything to be particularly proud of at the moment.

His Nautolan partner, Eaden Vrill, endured it the way he endured everything—with silent stoicism. Nautolans as a species tended to be unemotional. Add to that Eaden's few decades of training in the teras kasi martial arts discipline, and the result was a very inscrutable alien. They'd been working together for over four months, and Dash still found it hard to fathom what was going on much of the time behind the amphibian's large, maroon eyes.

"Awright, look," Kood Gareeda said at last, his vocal organs giving the Basic a whistling, rubbery sound that made comprehension dicey. Once again,

Dash marveled at the alien's choice of occupations. Stand-up comedy was hardly the best choice for someone whose sibilants and fricatives all sounded alike.

Not that most audiences stayed around long enough to be annoyed by this. Put bluntly, Darth Vader probably did better shtick. But concern about Gareeda's financial future would have to take a back seat to concern about their own. As far as Dash was concerned, it was all over but the counting. He doubted that Eaden wanted to spend the money, but a mech-of-all-trades would be useful aboard the Outrider.

"Remind me again what he's programmed for," Dash prompted the Rodian. He'd swear the guy was sweating, and Rodians didn't even have sweat glands.

Gareeda ticked off the droid's features on his scaly digits. "Navigation, piloting, and weapons, as well as da usual repair capabilities standard in da LE series."

"And you're selling him because....?"

Another glance at the door, "'cause I was misinformed. I was told his safety protocols been hacked. Dey lied ta me."

The Rodian glowered at the dormant droid. "He's a mopak bodyguard. He'll shoot at sentients, but he won't hit 'em. What good's dat?"

A heavy thump from the door's direction once again drew the Rodian's attention. Dash decided it was time to wrap up this palaver.

Comedian or no, Gareeda's behavior suggested he was expecting something decidedly unfunny to happen at any second. It was even making Eaden jinky, judging from how the heavy cilia on his head twitched whenever Gareeda's nervous gaze swept past the entrance.

Besides, if the Rodian was under some sort of time pressure, that could only work to their advantage. "Fifteen hundred," Dash offered.

He got a baleful look from Gareeda's black, insectile orbs. The comic's fleshy proboscis worked angrily for a moment. Then-

"Fine. Gimme da creds. I gotta get off

"Well, if you need a boost off world, we can offer that, too."

The Rodian's bulbous eyes seemed to protrude even further. "No, no. I, ah, I c'n find 'nother passage...."

"You don't need to. You got us. Ten hundred-and a lift."

Gareeda made a slurping sound that approximated a human's gnashing of teeth, then stuck out a scaly hand. "Fine. Done. How soon d'you-we-space?"

Dash, suppressing a grin, handed over a one thousand credit note. "One hour. Dock Eighty-Four Twelve. Mid-Town facility."

Gareeda nodded and stood up to leave. Eaden halted him. "It's got a restraining bolt installed. What's wrong with it?"

The sharp, bitter odor of rank fear again pervaded the air. "Nuttin'. Jus' wanted ta make sure it didn't....wander off, dat's all."

"Great!" said Dash. "Let's fire it up."

The Rodian looked like he might cry. Dash had never seen such a sight; in fact, he wasn't even sure if Rodians could cry. "Look, if I'm gonna make it t'your ship inna hour, I gotta get my gear."

He was so obviously desperate that Dash gestured for him to be gone; there was no fun in torturing someone in such dire straits.

Gareeda fled like a mynock out of Mustafar. He didn't use the front entrance; he headed out the back.

"Well," said Eaden, "there he goes. Leaving us a thousand credits lighter with what's probably an inert piece of junk."

"At that price, who cares? Even if it doesn't work, the chassis alone is worth half again as much." He flipped the droid's master switch, and was pleased to see its photoreceptors light up.

"Optic circuitry works," Eaden said. He addressed the droid. "Are you functional?"

"Who's asking?" the droid replied tartly, then scanned the noisy, smoky chamber. "What's wrong with this reality? Where's my boss?"

Dash rolled his eyes. Wonderful. The Rodian had given the droid a personality substrate. Fairly easy to embed, and almost impossible to remove, because the more it interfaced with those around it, the more ingrained the substrate became.

It was probably almost firmware by now.

Welt, nothing to be done about it. "Your boss took off."

The droid's optics fluttered. "He.... left me?"

"Sold you. Took a thou of my hard-earned

"One thousand? I'm worth five times that!"

The droid's voice carried such indignity that Dash grinned in spite of the situation. "Got a pretty good opinion of yourself." "Believe me, you don't want to know my opinion of you."

Before Dash could reply, the bar's front door slammed open. Four beings entered. Two were large, brutal-looking humans, followed by a Barabel. The last was a Trandoshan. They looked exactly like what they undoubtedly were: trouble.

One of the humans zeroed in on Dash's table and pointed. The others looked. Then, all four moved with a purpose- right at them.

Eaden stood. Cracked his knuckles. Dash turned to the droid. "What do you call yourself?"

"None of your business. I..."

"Stow it. Emergency nomenclature override. New name:

"Integrating data. New name: Leebo."

"Okay, Leebo, let's move back. We don't want to get hit by flying thugs."

As Eaden had anticipated, Kood Gareeda was a no-show; they lifted off without him. No sooner were they clear of the planet's gravity well and entering deep space than they were hailed.

"Heave to," came a raspy voice over the comm, speaking Shyriiwook, Dash noticed with surprise.

"Says who?" he asked.

"Says Kravengash, business associate of Hox Bilan."

Dash blinked at the comm. Neither of the names meant anything to him, but the phrase "business associate" did. It meant "Trouble" with a capital B. This far Rimward the ubiquitous crime syndicate Black Sun was little more than a name; even so, it was still a name that inspired caution. Even the Empire stepped lightly around the interplanetary criminal organization. Dash had run afoul of them more than once and he hated them with a passion; an emotion many rank-and-file criminals heartily echoed, although Dash's loathing went quite a bit deeper. He didn't have time to dwell on that now, though.

Out here in the Deep it was the dream, he'd heard, of most small-time organleggers, spice runners, and purveyors of other ill-gotten merchandise, to someday pull off something of such audacious criminality as to become noticed by the galactic underlords of crime-to become a "made sentient," as it were.

Dash gritted his teeth. He'd thought-hoped-that by heading this far out he'd finally be rid of that whole noxious crew of cutthroats, at least for awhile. That maybe he could at least let some memories settle before going back to the more "civilized" center.

Apparently not.

"It would seem that we now know why Kood Gareeda was so anxious to consummate his deal with us," Eaden said mildly.

"You think?" Dash flipped the comm off. "Time to go. Stand by for lightspeed."

But the Wookiee was impatient; he started blasting before they could make the jump. Charged-particle beams sizzled past them, close enough to burn paint.

Dash canted the ship to port, but not fast enough-a beam splashed against the rear deflectors, rocking the Outrider and jolting her crew. A sizzle of sparks erupted from the console.

Eaden looked at Dash. "Hyperdrive is..."

"Offline again, yeah, I noticed." He hit the thrusters, pulled the ship into a tight parabola and started looking for cover. There was nothing save the flat blackness of space, with a few stars twinkling....

Very few, he realized.

Somewhere close by was a light source big enough to wash out the starlight. Dash looked at the mass indicator and quickly homed in on the source-a huge gas giant, over 200,000 kilometers in diameter. He didn't stop to think. He slewed the ship to port and up.

"I need calculations, Leebo! Plot a slingshot orbit around that gas giant.

If we can get enough speed, we can kick-start the hyperdrive."

"Just what makes you think I can do that?" Leebo asked. "And if by some chance I could, hull integrity would be at risk, and..."

"Getting shot by that gunship will risk hull integrity a lot more, bolthead! Gareeda said orbital navigation was part of your package. So get me those numbers or I start ejecting mass-and guess what's first out the airlock?"

"Your point is persuasive," Leebo said.

A moment later, the droid rattled off a complex calculation.

"Implement," Dash said tersely to Eaden.

"No time to check the sequence," Eaden objected.

"If he's off by so much as a decimal point..."

"Just do it!"

The Wookiee's cruiser hung close behind them as if tethered by a tractor beam as Dash plunged the Outrider into the far reaches of the huge planet's atmosphere.

Behind him, Leebo rattled off coordinates, velocities, and vectors.

"Optimum perigee in twelve-point-nine-seconds....increase thrust by point eighty-one....ninety-seven degrees vertical, thirty-seven degrees starboard roll on my mark," the droid said. "Four.... three.... two.... one-

Eaden made the corrections while Dash engaged the thrusters. The Outrider shot out of the gas giant's gravity well like a laser lancing off a durasteel mirror and rocketed into vacuum-close enough to the cruiser that they could see their distorted reflection in its fuselage.

"All right!" Dash yelled. The ship vibrated from the combination of speed, gravity, and the thrust of her own engines. It rattled his teeth, but the hull held together.

"We have hyperdrive," Eaden said, his eyes on the instruments.

"Fire 'em up. Let's ditch this system."

The cruiser was turning, but there was no way it could complete the maneuver in time. Eaden threw Outrider into hyperspace.

The stars blurred, and a moment later they winked out of normal space.

"My previous master wouldn't have yelled at me," Leebo pouted.

When Dash glared at him, his temper slowly building, the droid added, "I'm just sayin'...."

Eaden cleared his throat.

Dash swung about, "What?"

"It appears that we lost Kravengash," the Nautolan said, his voice maddeningly mild.

"Yeah?" Dash tripped both scanners, close- and long-range. No hyperdrive signatures detected. "Still think Leebo was a bad investment? If he hadn't been here, we'd be plasma."

Eaden didn't say anything.

"What, too stubborn to admit you were wrong?"

"Not at all. I was merely wondering what this Hox Bilan fellow wanted with us."

Dash shrugged.

"Where are you going with this?"

"Back to the cantina, where those four thugs were obviously looking for something they thought we had.'

Dash turned to look at the droid. He didn't like where this was headed. "They might have had a perfectly legit reason-"

"And I suppose it's a coincidence that Kood Gareeda is not on this vessel, though he desperately wanted to flee Rodia.

And also that a local crime boss tried to stop us as soon as we lifted."

Dash blinked. Yeah. It didn't take an astrophysicist to plot that course intersection. "Put it on autopilot. You and I and Leebo are gonna go down to the common room for a little talk...."

* * *

"He sold me. I still can't believe it."

"Yeah, yeah, we've established that. Moving on. Why would this Hox Bilan be looking for you? Seriously enough to send muscle and a cruiser?"

"Not a clue. I've done nothing to justify such action...that I recall."

"What about Gareeda? He do anything?"

"Other than irritating audiences by being painfully unfunny?" The droid rattled its shoulders in a shrug. "Although probably he wasn't bad enough to score a deathmark from a career criminal. Probably not."

"I'm curious," Eaden said. "Why are you so fond of him?"

Leebo hesitated. "He programmed me to like him."

Dash laughed. "That's funny."

"Your face is funny." Leebo's tone was-decidedly sulky.

Eaden had been studying the droid, intently. Now he said, "That restraining bolt's pulling too much power."

Dash looked at him. "And you know this how?"

"I once worked security in a droid factory on Coruscant. That is not a standard design."

"Get a wrench and let's have a look." Eaden removed the bolt. When he turned it over, a short, thin rod fell onto the table.

"Hmm. That appears to be a micro-datastick."

Dash picked up the tiny device, which was as long as his thumbnail and one-eighth as wide. He looked at Leebo. "Got a reader slot?"

"Of course." Leebo took the proffered datastick and pressed it into the tip of one finger. There was a short pause.

"It's encrypted."

Of course it is. "Can you break the code?" Dash asked.

"Eventually."

Dash swore softly. He'd bet the Outrider and everything on her that the datastick belonged to Bilan and that the criminal wanted it back. A lot.

This was bad...but maybe not all bad. Maybe they could swing a deal. If they could convince Kravengash they neither knew nor cared what was on the datastick....

Hey, we acquired this by mistake, don't know what it is, don't care, happy to give it back, and if you want to, you know, give us a little something for our trouble, we're okay with that, too.

That these crooks were more of the penny-ante nature could actually work in their favor. Most of them were little more sophisticated than space pirates. Surely he could smooth-talk his way out of their bad graces.

Could be worse....

* * *

An hour later, Leebo came into the cockpit. "I've decoded the datastick."

Dash said, "And....?"

"It's a list of Black Sun Vigos in the Third Quadrant, along with data records of their transactions for the last six months, profits and losses, along with names of those on their payrolls-including police, military, judges, and politicians."

Dash stared, speechless. "All that....?" "For starters."

Okay, it couldn't be worse.

"Let's pretend we didn't hear this."

He looked at Leebo. "And you forget you know it." "Kind of hard without scrubbing my memory."

Dash felt like his scalp had been given a knuckle burn by a wampa.

He was quite literally stunned, speechless. "How-how did..."

"Doesn't matter," Eaden said.

Dash stared at him.

"Most likely the Rodian needed cash and agreed to ferry-or let Leebo ferry-the data." He looked at the droid. "Did you have any idea of the stick's ultimate destination?"

"Sorry. My boss was fond of the phrase 'Need to know.'"

Eaden stated the obvious: "Knowledge of this makes us a danger to both Black Sun and the Empire. The Imperials would move planets to get this data. With it they could wipe out a major portion of the criminal organization in the Third Quadrant. Black Sun wants this, obviously, and anybody who might have learned what it was will be vaporized."

Dash looked at the droid. "There's probably a transponder of some sort in the datastick. That's how they tracked you."

"Oh, I feel so loved. Can't we eject it into space and let them find it?"

"They could tell it's been decoded, and we don't want that," Eaden said. "The only hope we have of surviving is to make sure, somehow, that they-Bilan, Black Sun, the Empire, whoever finds it first-think we never knew it existed, much less what was on it."

"Would it help," Leebo asked, "if we could suddenly be halfway across the galaxy?"

"Sure couldn't hurt. What have you got in mind?"

* * *

They were approaching a binary star system, where an old Hutt jumpgate, though officially out of commission, was still in operation, maintained by a cadre of smugglers who offered passage for ships in a hurry-at a price, of course.

As they drew closer, they noticed two things: First, the com was silent; the gate crew wasn't responding. Could be the com was out, or it could be the crew wasn't around?

Or something worse?

"Odd," Leebo muttered. His optics momentarily defocused, which Dash knew, was the droid equivalent of deep thought.

Dash was temporarily distracted by a ping! from the aft sensor.

Kravengash was coming up fast from behind.

"Captain Rendar, we have a problem," Leebo said.

"I know. The gate crew is gone and the Wookiee's on our tail again."

"Those are the least of our problems." The droid pointed at a holoschematic of the star system. "The secondary star in this system is a white dwarf."

"So?"

"My sensors show it's accreted enough degenerate matter from the primary to put it near critical mass."

Dash stared at the forward screen, which showed an awe-inspiring view of the binary system. A list of alphanumerics curtained down the screen. "How near? Millennia? Centuries? Years?"

"Closer to eleven..."

Dash felt a rush of relief. "Eleven years? That's not so..."

"...minutes."

Dash was speechless. Eleven minutes until the star went supernova, producing, for a few moments, more energy than the rest of the hundred billion stars in the galaxy combined? They couldn't outrun that! No wonder the gate crew wasn't around. This operation was about to get shut down for a long, longtime....

"You said nothing about this! All you said was there was a jumpgate near a binary system!"

"And I was right."

"Yeah," Dash said, seething. "Kudos. You might've mentioned the star that in..." he glanced this chrono "...nine minutes will reduce this ship and us to clouds of quarks".

"Well, how was I to know? A star exists for billions of years-the odds were literally astronomical that..."

"Enough. We have to get through the gate," Eaden said. "And we can't do that with Kravengash blocking our route. They'll nail us when we decelerate for transition."

Dash was thinking fast and furiously. "Maybe he doesn't know. If we tell him, than maybe we can both get

"Oh, he knows," Eaden said. "No doubt he's been told he can look forward to a lingering and painful demise' if he fails to recover the datastick. So for him; it's a choice between protracted torture, or annihilation so swift he'll never feel a thing.

"Doesn't help us," Dash said. "In four minutes we're all gonna be gamma rays."

"I'll distract them," Leebo said.

Dash blinked. "How?"

"Take a life pod and harass 'em. Are the pods armed?"

"Yes, but..."

"You can make the gate transit while I keep the Wookiee occupied. After a few more minutes, he won't be around to follow."

"Neither will you," Eaden pointed out.

Leebo's servos whined as he shrugged. "You've shown me more kindness in a few hours than my previous owners ever did. I owe you."

* * *

When the Wookiee came in for the kill, Leebo's escape pod zipped in from above and started firing. The blasters on the pod weren't much, but they were enough that Kravengash had to deal with them.

Dash watched the viewport. "So, long, Leebo," he murmured.

He looked at the datastick in his hand. Considered keeping it.... for about three seconds. He ejected it into space. Good luck on finding that after the star blew up.

Dash aimed the Outrider at the gate and Eaden triggered the entrance code. Dash hoped it still worked-otherwise they were going to be caught on the wrong side of the gate in the deadly sphere of a supernova.

With a minute and ten seconds to go, he triggered the thrusters....

...and felt the familiar jolt of the energy transfer as the gate lobbed them into another part of the galaxy.

"Too bad about the droid, " Eaden said when they were safely on the other end of the jump. "I was beginning to...that's peculiar."

"What?" Dash followed Eaden's gaze to the viewport.

The gate was dilating again.

No. Not the Wookiee.

There was a flash of light and the life pod shot through.

No way. Dash activated the comm. "Leebo?"

The droid's face appeared in the heads-up display that overlaid the forward viewport. "You were expecting someone else?"

"How-?"

"Beats me. I was between the ship and the gate, battling nobly for your lives..."

"Yes," Eaden said. "And was the cruiser by any chance eclipsing the star system when the star went nova?"

"Maybe...."

"Ah," Eaden said. "The supernova energy interacted with the hypermatter in both ships' drives to create a protective local space-time hyper-fold. It only required that the cruiser's bulk shield the pod for a fraction of a second."

Dash stared at him as if he'd grown a second head.

Eaden shrugged. "Elementary hyper-physics-to a droid with the proper programming."

Dash regarded Leebo wryly. "So you knew about that stunt all along. And you had me believing you were gonna sacrifice yourself."

"I'm insulted," Leebo said. "I take on this dangerous mission-loyally, selflessly, with no thought for my own safety...."

"Banthaflop." Dash grinned. "Come aboard. And welcome to the crew, Tin Man...."

Turning Point

Twin moons hung majestically in the evening sky over the Locura Ocean. The orbs lit the coastline, softly illuminating the Tahika Cliffs and creating what appeared to be an air of tranquility.

A gentle breeze brushed the face of the tall, dark-haired young man who leaned against the balcony rail on the clifftop. Dair Haslip knew that breeze only added to the illusion of calm. For closer to the water, treacherous winds and unforgiving surf pummelled the cliffs.

Dair loved this place on his homeworld more than any other. Here he'd found solace in times of despair. He'd found inspiration. And now that he was preparing to leave Garos IV for the first time, he wanted every detail -- the surf, the winds, the cliffs, the moons -- etched into his memory. It might be a long time before he came home.

He'd grown up along these cliffs -- he looked south toward the point --the lights of his grandmother's home were barely visible. He thought of Jos, his best friend, and the times they'd hiked the hill-sides using those lights as a beacon to guide them home. On nights just like this one, they'd planned their futures together at the Raithal Academy -- Dair shook his head glumly. Jos wouldn't be leaving with him now. The Empire did not look favorably upon

someone whose father was wanted for treasonous crimes. Why did things have to turn out like this, he wondered?

Searching for an answer among the stars, Dair gazed skyward. There was no answer for Jos. But what Dair did see there filled his heart with pride.

Silhouetted against one moon, the Imperial *Lambda*-class shuttle descended through wispy clouds. It glided effortlessly toward the spaceport south of Ariana. That shuttle, and the Empire it represented, meant more to him now that he'd been accepted into the Academy. And with the Empire's interest in Garos IV growing more in evidence each day, there were promises of increased prosperity and jobs for Garosians, opportunities for young men like himself.

"Have you ever seen a more magnificent sight?" someone said from behind him.

Dair turned around. He straightened his lean frame, pulling back his shoulders. The deep, rich baritone voice didn't seem to fit the short-statured gentleman who joined him on the patio. "No, sir," he answered. "How are you this evening, Minister Paca?"

"Good. Very good," Paca replied, taking a deep breath of the sea air. "You are Dair Haslip, am I right?"

Dair threw him a smile, amazed that the Assistant Minister of Commerce remembered him from their first meeting over a year earlier. "Yes, sir. I escorted my grandmother to the reception this evening."

Paca nodded. "Keriin Haslip. Yes, I'm quite familiar with your family, Dair," he said as he moved toward the balcony railing. "I admired your father's work. Such tragedy."

Dair looked away. He remembered how a Sundar bomb had taken both his parents during the ongoing civil war between native Garosians and colonists from Sundari. Even after six years, the pain wouldn't go away, "Do you think the Empire will be able to stop the violence, Minister Paca?" he asked.

"Minister Winger is working closely with Imperial officials toward that goal." Paca stared toward the horizon and sighed. "Of course," he said quietly, "there is a price to pay when the Empire *helps* a world."

"Well, sure," Dair said naively. "Higher taxes, a larger military presence. But then we'll have peace on Garos."

Paca looked over the railing at the sea pounding the cliffs far below them. "Peace," he repeated. There was a sadness in Paca's voice that caused Dair to turn and stare. But whatever he thought he'd heard quickly disappeared behind Paca's broad grin. "So, Mr. Haslip, what are your plans now that your grandmother has sold the mines?"

"I'm enrolled at the university now, sir. But I've been accepted to the Imperial Academy for the next term," Dair proudly replied.

"So you'll be leaving Garos for the larger universe up there," the older man said, pointing toward the stars. "Army or navy?"

"Army, sir. I like my feet on the ground."

Paca laughed. "I understand."

"All right, Magir Paca, I caught you! Are you corrupting my grandson?" Moonlight reflected off Keriin Haslip's long silvery hair. Her lined face hinted that she was no stranger to hard times. But there was a spark in her dark eyes, like a fire burning brightly, that even the bad times had not extinguished.

"Of course not, Madame Haslip. You know me better than that," he teased her, kissing the hand she extended toward him. "We've been discussing Dair's future. I've just heard his good news. Garos will be proud to have one of its finest young men attend the Academy."

Dair stood straighter, noticing the flash of pride that swept across his grandmother's face. But her smile seemed almost forced. Though he had noticed she'd grown quieter on the subject of his leaving Garos as that time grew close. He was her only family after all -- that would explain her lack of enthusiasm.

Keriin looped her arm through Dair's. "Tell me, Paca," she said, clearing her throat, "is there any truth to the rumors I've heard about Minister Winger?"

"I believe we are looking at our first Imperial governor," Paca said.

"Uncle Tork? I mean, Minister Winger?" Dair marvelled. "That's great, isn't it, Gram?"

"Uncle?" Paca questioned.

"The Wingers have always been like family," Keriin explained to an amused-looking Paca. "And yes, Dair, Tork Winger would be a good choice given his knowledge of the current peace negotiations with the Sundars," she added.

Paca nodded his agreement. "Yes, hopefully the Empire will not force a peace," he said, shifting uncomfortably when he caught the puzzled expression on Dair's face.

"Force a peace?" Dair frowned, looking from his grandmother to Paca as footsteps echoed across the old stone patio. He saw the tension drain from Paca's face.

"Minister Paca? I'm sorry to interrupt."

"What is it, Linsa?"

"Senior Lieutenant Brandei's shuttle has just landed. Minister Winger has been called away to meet with him."

"This late in the evening?" *How strange.* "Excuse me, Madame Haslip. Dair. I must speak with Minister Winger before he leaves."

"Of course, sir," Dair said. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, my friend," Keriin called to him. "Well, Dair, I guess we'll have to make other arrangements to get home this evening." Dair sighed. He'd been looking forward to the Winger's visit all week.

"Uncle Tork was going to tell me more about his days at the Academy," he told his grandmother.

"Well, perhaps another night," she smiled. "So, tell me, young man, did you come outside to escape from us old folks?"

Dair took a deep breath. "I guess I was thinking about Jos, Gram. He should have been here tonight."

"He could have come with us, Dair."

"I told him that. But he said everyone would be talking about his father. And he was right, Gram! That's half the conversation I've heard! `Did they capture old Desto Mayda yet? They're gonna terminate Mayda for sure!' "

"I know Jos must be hurting," Keriin said. "Did you tell him that your acceptance had come through?"

"Yes. He was expecting it, but he really doesn't want to talk about it. But he did say he wants me to go."

"And you don't believe he's being sincere?"

"It's not that. It's just, I know how I'd feel if the situation were reversed. He's my best friend, Gram." A smile crossed Dair's face. One memory was so clear, like it had just happened yesterday. "Did I ever tell you what Jos and I did that summer after my tenth birthday?"

Keriin shook her head.

"You know that stretch of cliffs just south of Mount Usca -- we used to go climbing there all the time," Dair told her, noticing that even in the moonlight her face seemed to pale.

"I fell once," he continued. "I wasn't hurt bad, Gram. But I was so scared, I couldn't move."

"What happened?"

Dair chuckled. "Jos came down after me. I was gripping the rock face for dear life! Jos is next to me, dangling over the ocean from this rope. And he's carrying on a normal conversation like we were standing on flat ground. I bet he talked for 10 minutes, just dangling there! He had me laughing and before I

knew it, we were scaling the cliff!" Dair sighed. "He was always there for me, Gram. And well, now I feel like I'm deserting him."

"Oh, Dair --"

"Keriin?"

Dair turned impatiently, disappointed that they'd been interrupted. But Sali Winger's arrival made him temporarily forget his depression over Jos. Aunt Sali had been his mother's closest friend. And she'd grown even closer to his grandmother in the years since West and Nieka Haslip's deaths.

Dair could see why Tork Winger called himself the luckiest man on the planet. A wife like Sali was the dream of every politician. Attractive, charming, and intelligent, she could turn a boring diplomatic affair into a tremendous success.

"Sali dear, is everything all right?" Keriin asked.

"Yes, everything's fine," Sali replied, smiling sweetly at Dair and giving his arm a gentle squeeze. "But as you've heard, Lieutenant Brandei has asked Tork and I to join him at the medical center."

"At the medical center? How odd!" Keriin observed.

"Yes, I thought so, too. But he said he wants us to meet someone. If you don't mind coming with us, we can still stop by your house just as we'd planned, only after this meeting."

"Well, of course, dear. That will be just fine," she smiled. "Maybe we'll even invite the Lieutenant along!"

"What an excellent idea, Keriin," she said. "Dair, are you sure you don't mind leaving the reception?"

"No, not at all, Aunt Sali," Dair replied enthusiastically, excited by the prospect of meeting a naval officer from a Star Destroyer. He offered each woman an arm.

"Such a gentleman!" Sali said as they walked toward the door. "By the way, Dair, why haven't you and Jos been by the mansion lately? I hope Jos isn't embarrassed about the awful things I've been hearing about his father ..."

* * *

"Brandei, what in the worlds is this about?" Tork Winger asked, greeting his old friend. "What are we doing here?"

Brandei smiled mysteriously. "Come with me," he said.

Dair walked behind the group down the corridor of Ariana's medical center. Keeping a watchful eye on the Imperial lieutenant, Dair was impressed by his swift, deliberate gait and the way he held himself. Everything about the man exuded confidence. Dair wondered if graduation from Raithal Academy would endow him with such confidence.

"I understand you're here on your own," Winger was saying.

"I completed a special assignment in the Reega system, and was given permission to come ahead on 'unofficial' business, old friend," Brandei replied. "The *Judicator* will be arriving within a few days. The captain sends his regards, and asked me to tell you he will meet with you then."

"All right. But why are we here now?"

Brandei stopped in front of a glass wall which separated them from a patient's room. Dair saw a young lieutenant, not much older than himself, sitting by the bedside of a child. The child's head was bandaged and her face was bruised.

"Oh dear, that poor child!" Sali Winger gasped, reaching out toward Keriin for support.

"What happened?" Keriin asked.

"We found her, barely alive, in the rubble of a house after a raid. Damn Rebels," Brandei said, his voice filled with disgust. "The medics assure us she will recover. But the child has no family, Sali. They were killed in the raid."

Sali turned to her husband. Dair saw her eyes fill with tears. Then she looked at Brandei, hoping she read correctly the meaning behind his words. "You're going to leave her with us?" she asked.

Brandei took Sali's hand. He knew she'd been unable to have a child of her own. "I told the captain about you. He thought it was an excellent idea." He smiled gently. "Poetic justice, so to speak -- a Rebel child raised by an official of the Empire."

A Rebel child? Dair's mind raced a thousand kilometers a second. He wondered what kind of men could do this to their own people -- their own children.

"Do you know her name?" Sali asked as Dair caught Uncle Tork studying her reflection in the glass. There was no trace of the high-powered politician in his eyes, only a man deeply in love with his wife.

Brandei shook his head. "She's drifted in and out of consciousness, hasn't said a word."

"Who's the young man with her?" Winger asked.

"That's Lieutenant Chancellor. He's the one who dug her from the rubble. He seems to have appointed himself guardian."

"May I go in?"

"Of course, Sali."

"Keriin, come with me -- please?" she implored.

Keriin nodded, motioning for Dair to follow. He wondered why she seemed so insistent that he go into the sick bay. She knew how much he disliked these places -- too many memories of the time his parents died.

As the door slid shut behind them, Dair shuddered. Medical equipment hummed quietly, blinking sickening yellow and blue lights. The room was cold and uninviting. But only Dair seemed to notice.

"Lieutenant Chancellor, I was told you saved this child," Sali said as the young man slowly stood up and turned to face them. Piercing blue eyes met Sali's eyes. "Yes, ma'am. I --I just couldn't leave her there to die."

"Thank you for watching over her," she told him. "There's something special about this little girl, ma'am."

"Special?"

"It's like she was reaching out, drawing strength from everything around her, just trying to stay alive." He shook his head sadly. "Such a shame what happened to her home."

"A Rebel raid?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. We were looking for a Rebel stronghold right near this little one's home. Our forces destroyed half the city." He took the child's hand into his. "I never want to see anything like that again," he said quietly.

"Our forces?" Sali asked.

Chancellor's eyes were riveted on Sali. "Yes, ma'am. We did this," he said as a bitterness crept into his voice. "There were no Rebels there."

Sali stood speechless, her eyes widened in shock. Dair frowned, skeptical of what he'd heard. Surely there was some mistake. The lieutenant was exaggerating. "That can't be right," he said.

"I was there, kid. I know what I saw," Chancellor replied.

From the corner of his eye, Dair caught his grandmother's expression. Her gaze was transfixed on the child. And the silent nod of her head was more powerful a statement than any words. She believed him! *I don't understand this!*

Chancellor surprised Sali when he reached for her hand. "You take good care of her, ma'am," he said. Gently he placed the child's hand into hers.

"Yes, I will, Lieutenant," she told him. "Thank you for giving her a chance to live."

"A chance," he nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Good-bye, ma'am."

* * *

Wind rustled tree branches in the densely forested hillsides north of the mines. The baraka trees had taken on a purplish hue -- the weather would turn cooler soon. And though it was still three hours until sunset, thick shadows had begun to crawl upon the landscape. The mountains were alive with animal life, but it was the sound of human predators that worried Dair.

"Shhh! Would you be quiet! We could get in a lot of trouble," Dair whispered to his friend. He couldn't believe he'd let Jos talk him into this.

"For what? We aren't doing anything wrong," Jos Mayda replied in a tone that was uncharacteristically defiant.

"I don't know if those Imperial scout troopers would agree with you," Dair told him as he peered through his macrobinoculars.

Jos shrugged, pushing long golden locks out of his eyes. "You worry too much, Dair. We've been hiking out here in these hills for years. Your grandma owns all this land anyway!"

"She used, to," Dair reminded him, scanning the hillsides nervously.

Rolling his eyes, Jos scowled at that one minor detail. He leaned back against a tree, placed his hands behind his head, and sighed. "Remember the time we got lost in the caves, Dair?"

Dair grimaced. "Yeah, I thought your dad was gonna blast us both when he found -- " he paused, remembering the forbidden topic. "I'm sorry, Jos. I didn't mean --

Jos shook his head. "It's okay. Gotta face facts, you know. We aren't kids anymore. My father's an outlaw, a traitor. I'll never see him again!"

There was more than just anger behind Jos' voice. "I know he cares about you, Jos."

"If he cares so much, then why couldn't he tell me, just explain to me, why he felt he had to work with the underground!" Jos exclaimed. He buried his face in his hands and suddenly burst into tears.

Dair sat silently sharing Jos' loss as if it were his own. He placed his hand on Jos' shoulder. He knew there were no words that would comfort his friend.

"You know, all I ever wanted was to go to the Academy," Jos finally said.

"Remember our plans, Dair? We were gonna see the galaxy together! They'll never let me go to the Academy now!"

"Maybe there's still a chance, Jos. My gram could talk to Minister Winger -- "

"Oh, forget it, Dair! I'll be stuck on Garos forever!"

Frowning at his friend, Dair watched him wipe the tears from his eyes. Jos had changed so much these last few weeks. He'd always been able to make the best of any situation.

"Well, maybe I'll stay here, too," Dair told him. "We can both go to the university and then we'll open up our own business!"

Jos' brow wrinkled in disapproval. "No, Dair. You have to go." The frown on his face turned to a sly grin. "Yeah, I want you to go. Then you can tell me all about it, okay?" he said, picking up his macrobinoculars to scan the hillsides. "Yep, I want to hear all about crawling around in the muck and getting yelled at by drill sergeants!"

Dair laughed. "I won't leave out any of the details!" he promised. He knew that behind the smart remarks it had been harder for Jos to tell him to go than it had been for him to offer to stay.

"Look! Two troopers at 1-2-0," Jos said. "Boy, those speeder bikes sure are something. I heard they have top speeds of 500 kmh! Can you just imagine?"

"Quiet!" Dair whispered.

"I bet they're looking for that naval officer who deserted."

"Where'd you hear that tale, Jos?" Dair asked.

"Down at Chado's Pub. They were talking about this lieutenant -- I think his name was Chancellor."

"Chancellor?" Could it really be the officer he'd seen at the medical center a few days earlier?

"One of the guys said he was an aide to some officer from the *Judicator*!" Jos shook his head like he could hardly believe anyone would consider desertion. "C'mon, let's take a closer look at those scout troopers!"

"Are you crazy? It's too late anyway," Dair said.

"They just disappeared over the ridge. C'mon, let's go home."

Suddenly, Dair heard the whine of engines. Through a break in the trees he spotted the two speeder bikes. The scout troopers had circled around them and were moving in swiftly.

"C'mon, Jos! To the caves," he said, scampering across the hillside. Jos hesitated a few seconds then scrambled through the trees in the opposite direction from Dair.

Shots rang out. A few meters ahead of Dair, a sapling cracked as a blast ripped it in two. He dove into the underbrush just as another shot whipped over his head. Crawling on hands and knees, he fumbled through the bushes and into a cave.

Dair didn't even have time to catch his breath when he heard one of the speeder bikes stop nearby. Fallen tree branches crackled under armored footsteps. The scout trooper drew closer.

Dair's heart pounded. He crouched, unmoving, in a dark recess of the cave, hoping the trooper would give up his search. From experience Dair knew that the mineral content of the mountains on this part of Garos played havoc with sensors. And inside the cave, he'd be shielded from their probes.

The scout trooper batted aside some bushes near the entrance to the cave. Then suddenly he stopped, and Dair realized that someone was shouting in the distance. Blaster fire echoed through the hills. The scout trooper bolted back toward his bike.

Dair cautiously poked his head through the bushes, catching a fleeting glimpse of the speeder bike as it whipped over the crest of a nearby hill. He was safe. But what about Jos? That blaster fire he'd heard -- what if they'd caught Jos?

Dair dashed up the hillside after the scout trooper. From his vantage point a few minutes later, he spotted two deserted speeder bikes halfway down the hill. He moved silently toward them.

Muffled voices floated through the air in a deathlike litany. Then, some 10 meters away from the bikes, he saw the white armor against the greenish-brown backdrop of forest. One blaster rifle was trained on a prone figure.

"Please, no," Dair whispered to himself as he moved behind the bikes for cover. Jos' hand twitched. Dair breathed a sigh of relief as his friend slowly rose to his knees.

"Where's your comrade?" one of the troopers asked Jos.

"Get up, spy!" the other one shouted.

Dair couldn't hear Jos' reply, but watched as he tried to stand. "You're not? Then what are you doing out here near the mines? Didn't you know this is a restricted area?"

Jos answered, but still too softly for Dair to understand.

"Hiking? Makes for a good story, spy!" the trooper grunted. "Let's take him back to headquarters," he told the other trooper. "Move it!"

Suddenly, Jos lunged forward, taking one scout trooper down. They rolled across the ground, and Jos struggled to gain control of the man's blaster rifle. But as he ripped it away from his opponent, the rifle flew through the air, landing only an arm's length from Dair. Jos untangled himself from the scout trooper's grasp. He scrambled to his feet and took off, not knowing that Dair had retrieved the blaster.

The other trooper aligned his gun sight on the fleeing figure. One deadly shot pierced the air. Jos collapsed to the ground.

"No!" Dair screamed. Two startled scout troopers turned simultaneously to face him. Another blast echoed across the mountainside.

Jos' killer was dead.

Visibly shaken, Dair kept the blaster rifle trained on the other scout trooper. "Don't move!" Dair yelled at him. He didn't want to kill an unarmed man.

The trooper ignored him, recovering his fallen comrade's rifle in a diving roll across the forest floor. Two shots were fired. And suddenly the mountainside seemed coldly silent.

The second scout trooper lay dead. Dair stared at the rifle in his trembling hands, then threw it to the ground.

"Jos!" he cried out, running to his fallen friend.

Dair took the lifeless hand into his. Stunned, he sat beside Jos for a long time unable to move, unable to think.

As darkness crept in upon the mountain, Dair wept. Through his tears he gently closed Jos' eyes.

* * *

Dair collapsed on the stone steps of the patio. He stared at the sea. It offered no peace for him tonight. A breeze swept gently off the water. It mingled with the smell of fresh-baked shrail, one of his grandmother's special treats, which wafted from the kitchen. He could hear her working there.

There was no way he could sneak into the house. She'd hear him. He allowed himself a smile. He remembered that Jos had said his grandmother had ears as sharp as the wild boetays that roamed the Garosian mountainsides.

Jos. A tear formed in his eye. Jos was dead.

"Dair, is that you?" her voice rang out from the kitchen.

"Yes, Gram, it's me," he called, wiping the tear with a dirt-streaked hand as the door onto the patio opened.

She couldn't help noticing how filthy he was. "Good skies, son! What in the worlds happened to you?"

Biting his lip, Dair turned to look at her. She could see the pain in his eyes.

"We need to talk," she said firmly. "Get cleaned up. I'll make us some tea." He nodded, his head hung low. Then he trudged up to his room. Fifteen minutes later, Gram Haslip poured their tea and sat down across the table from her only grandson.

"Well, you look a whole lot better," she said, trying to cheer him up.

"Oh, Gram -- " Tears welled up in his eyes.

She placed her hand on top of his. "What happened?" "It's Jos, Gram. He's dead."

"What!" she exclaimed. "How?"

"We were near the mines. Two scout troopers thought we were spying. They killed Jos! They shot him in the back, Gram!"

If she was shocked by that revelation, he could see no sign of it in her face.

"What happened to the scout troopers, Dair?"

"I -- I killed them." He hesitated. "And I hid their rifles in a cave near the cliffs," he said, trying to sort through his feelings -- he wasn't sure why he'd done it, but it just seemed the right thing to do at the time.

Keriin Haslip pulled her chair around the table. She wrapped her arms around Dair and held him tightly. "It's okay, Dair," she reassured him. "Everything will be all right."

"I can't believe they'd shoot an unarmed man in the back, Gram!" Dair finally said when his tears stopped flowing. "Is that what I will become if I join the Imperial Army?"

"The Empire doesn't follow the rules of civilized beings, Dair," she told him. "It follows its own rules and changes them to suit its own needs."

"Is that how you've always felt about the Empire, Gram?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"But you sold the mines to them! And you were going to let me go to the Academy!"

"I was forced to sell the mines, Dair. I had no choice. And you had to make up your own mind about the Empire -- what is right, what is wrong." She paused, searching his eyes. Past the grief, she found what she was looking for. "In time, I knew you would find the answer."

Dair nodded. "What do we do now, Gram?" he asked.

"The Imperials will assume the underground did this. I must get word to -- "

She stopped mid-sentence.

Dair stared at his grandmother and frowned. "Get word to whom, Gram?"

Keriin Haslip studied her grandson's handsome face, his dark eyes so like his father's. He'd grown up quite a bit in these last few hours. He'd learned a hard lesson about life. About the Empire. It was time.

"Gram?"

"I have certain friends who will need to know what happened near the mines today."

"Friends?"

"Dair, I think its time you knew the truth about your old Gram. C'mon, let's go. There are some people I want you to meet."

* * *

The chamber deep beneath the university library was dank, not unlike the caves where Dair had played as a child. Air whistled through a vent in the ceiling, and Dair could have sworn he felt the vibrations of the sea pounding the nearby cliffs.

Bare except for a table and some chairs, the room was lit by a holographic map of the city of Ariana and the area surrounding the mines. Even in the dim light,

Dair could see the grim expression on a half dozen faces as they listened to his story.

Dair glanced around the table. He knew the two men on either side of his grandmother: Assistant Minister Magir Paca, whom he'd spoken to only a few days before, and Desto Mayda, his friend's father. A third man he recognized from newsvid releases covering the Garosian civil war. Camron Gelorik, a leader of the radical Sundars, now sat peacefully with Garosians he once ordered his followers to hunt down. Garosian and Sundar united. Their fight against the Empire had begun.

"He was just a boy!" Mayda exclaimed as Dair finished describing what had transpired near the mines. "Damn them all!"

"You realize the Imperials will blame the underground for this," Keriin Haslip told the group.

"I can see the newsvid now," Gelorik added. "Scout troopers shot while trying to protect innocent boy from underground hooligans!"

Several murmured their agreement, but Paca held his hand up to silence them. "Unlike the Empire, we don't kill innocent people," he reminded them. "Our friends know us better than that."

"But we should still get word out," Keriin Haslip said. "Everyone should know what animals they are!"

Desto Mayda shook his head. "That could be dangerous for your grandson, Keriin. Dair's friendship with Jos is well known," he said.

"Yes," Paca agreed, "Desto is right. If word gets out that someone was with Jos at the time of his murder, the Imperials would no doubt investigate Dair."

"That could lead to too many questions," Gelorik said quietly. He studied Dair's face. "And it could lead them back to us."

"You mean we have to cover up the truth?" Dair asked. "You're going to let them accuse you of murder?"

"I'm afraid so, son," Desto said. "At least for now."

Dair nodded, understanding these people were doing more than just placing their trust in him. This was a sacrifice that could make more enemies for the underground. It was a sacrifice for him. And he wasn't even one of them. Yet. "Can I do anything to help?" he asked.

"Well," Paca said, "we'll need to send a team in to retrieve those blaster rifles that you hid."

"I'd like to go with them, Minister, I mean, Paca," Dair told him.

"Good, son. We're glad to have you for as long as you're on Garos. You'll be headed to Raithal Academy soon, won't you?" Paca asked him.

"What!" Dair shook his head in disbelief. "I can't go to the Academy now. I don't want to be one of them!"

Desto Mayda grabbed Dair's hand from across the table, startling him. "Don't you see, Dair? You have the opportunity to work against the Empire from the inside, like Paca does at the Ministry."

"You can't turn down your acceptance now. Think how suspicious that might look," Paca said.

Dair began to see a career with the Empire in a whole different light.

"It may take you years. Undercover work can be a slow and tedious process. But little things, like supplies sent to the wrong command -- "

"Minor computer glitches -- " Mayda added.

"Orders not processed in a timely fashion --" someone else said. "All will undermine Imperial efforts," Paca continued. "Just think of the possibilities."

"Eventually, you ask for a transfer back to Garos. You'll be invaluable to us!" Gelorik told him.

"Think about it, son," Paca said.

Looking at each face in turn, Dair's eyes finally came to rest on his grandmother. Her eyes glistened with tears. Keriin Haslip knew what his choice

would be. She might be losing her grandson to the Empire, but it wasn't on their terms. It was on hers.

* * *

Dair stood in the hallway staring at the reflection in the mirror -- the reflection of someone who'd matured quickly to manhood these last few months. He felt stronger, more confident than ever. But as he embarked on this journey, he realized that he'd be alone out there, surrounded by people who blindly served the Empire. But he was determined to play the game their way, to learn everything he could learn. He *would* make a difference!

Straightening his blue-gray tunic, he nodded to himself. The double doors of the great room opened and Keriin Haslip beckoned to her grandson.

Dair took a deep breath and joined her in the doorway as applause broke out. He looked at the faces of his friends and blushed with embarrassment. A group of former classmates rushed up, slapping his back and shaking his hand.

Across the room Dair saw newly-appointed Imperial Governor Winger in an animated discussion with Magir Paca. Though he was no longer naive about the true nature of the Empire, Dair still had to admire Uncle Tork. Winger had turned out to be the voice of moderation, calling for an end to the Imperial purge of radicals on both sides of the civil war. Dair understood now what Paca had meant by "force a peace."

"Good luck, son," Paca said, shaking Dair's hand firmly.

"Thank you, Minister Paca," he replied. They'd said their private good-byes in the underground operations center only a few hours before.

"Dair, I couldn't be more proud if you were my own son," Winger said.

"Thank you, Governor," Dair replied. "I only hope I live up to everyone's expectations." He glanced toward his grandmother and Paca.

"You will, son," Winger said. "I've no doubt about that. You've been through some rough times here." He shook his head. "I'm still hoping they find those radicals who killed poor Jos Mayda -- "

Keriin Haslip nodded, almost imperceptibly, to Paca.

"I know you'll come through Raithal just fine," Winger said. "It's an experience you'll never forget. Or regret. Why, I remember when I was at the Academy on Carida -- "

"Oh, Tork! None of your old war stories now! We're supposed to be celebrating," Sali Winger said, playfully pushing her husband aside to give Dair a hug.

"Ah, yes. Well, Dair, you show them we're a tough bunch."

"I will, Governor. How are you, Madame Winger?" Dair greeted her.

"Dair, I can't believe you're leaving us! Just look at you! Your parents would be so proud!" she said, reaching back to grasp an unseen hand. "Alexandra, come and say good-bye to Dair," she urged the dark-haired child.

Sparkling blue eyes peeked around Sali's gown.

"Hello, Alex."

"Hi," she said holding her hand out for him to shake.

"I'm gonna miss our weekly card games," he said.

"You promised to teach me to play sabacc, remember?"

"Yeah, so you could beat me at that, too!" he laughed. "C'mon, let's check out our favorite view one more time," he said, taking the small hand into his and leading her outside onto the patio. He felt her fingers tighten around his.

"I bet you'll be all grown up when I come back," he told her as Garos' second moon made its debut on the horizon. And suddenly, a lump formed in his throat and his heart ached. He found himself thinking about Jos again.

"You miss him, don't you?" Alex asked quietly.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Huh? How did you know I was thinking about Jos?"

Alex shrugged. "Why do you have to leave?" she asked.

Dair picked her up in his arms. "You know I'm joining the Imperial Army."

Alex shrunk back from him for a moment. Then she looked at him, studying his face with those blue eyes of hers. He'd never seen such intensity in someone so young. It was almost as if she could see right through him.

Crooking her finger to draw him close, Alex whispered into his ear. "I don't believe you," she said. "But I won't tell."

Dair stared in amazement, then smiled at her. "Okay," he whispered back to her. "Thanks."

A cold wind blew across the clifftops. Dair and Alex watched the sea pound the cliffs, the violent forces of nature at work. There were other violent forces at work on Garos, forces of a man-made nature -- and they had changed Dair's life forever.

Final Exit

A planet of interminable extremes, Najiba existed in a state of perpetual spring, delineating seasons in terms of electrical disruptions and torrential rainstorms. Ross stared into the maturing squall, intrigued by the erratic veins of lightning which arced across the obscure, night skies. Sheltered beneath his YT-1300 light freighter, the *Kierra*, the Corellian searched the turbulent atmosphere above the open flight pad, following several amorphous shapes that loomed above the heavy cloud cover.

Clipped with military precision, soft spikes of blond hair glistened with the rain as miniature drops accumulated in the longer length above his ears. Yawning, the smuggler leaned against one of the support struts. His sleepy, blue eyes stared from the shadows, regarding several natives who were huddled beneath the storm eaves of Reuther's Wetdock.

"194?"

Pressing the comlink against his cheek, Ross responded, "194."

Alluring, a feminine voice replied, "What's the deal, Ross? We've been sitting here for over an hour."

"Are you bored, darling?" he teased, grinning handsomely in the dim light.

"Do you want an honest answer or just my opinion? Come on, flyboy," she pleaded, "Let's get moving."

"Don't get your circuits in a bunch." Affectionately he brushed a hand over the lower turret wondering in what section of the onboard systems she was hiding. Fondly named after his ship, the feisty droid intelligence had a tendency to focus on the optical sensors, possessed by an unusually feminine curiosity.

"*Orval*, Ross," a voice greeted from nearby.

Despite the familiarity of the Old Corellian dialect, Ross tensed, casually thumbing the restraint from his blaster. Propping the heavy pistol against the holster, he stared into the closest shadows and focused on the stooped silhouette. "Reuther?"

The aging Najib bartender stepped into the rain, humbled beneath the onslaught of cold drops. Sheltered below the *Kierra*, he straightened, staring into the young Corellian's face.

Vivacious with old world charm, his eyes were discerning and perceptive, contemplating Ross from head to toe. Meeting the smuggler's mischievous eyes, a proud smile played across his lips. "I see where you made the billboards in Mos Eisley last week. The Imperials are offering 5,000 credits for your head."

"Is that all?"

"Indeed," the old man chuckled. "Not nearly enough for a rogue with your credentials." Billowed red sleeves ballooned from Reuther's frail shoulders and arms, clashing with an oversized native tunic. Dampened by the rain, thinning gray hair was tightly braided against his freckled scalp. "It's good to see you, boy," Reuther whispered. Uncorking an intricately carved bottle, he poured a generous portion into a crystal goblet and handed it to the smuggler.

"Corellian whisky?" Ross questioned, sniffing the bitter aroma. "What's the occasion?"

"Growing old," Reuther croaked, nervously glancing over his shoulder, "and to having the strength to face tomorrow."

Suspicious, Ross followed the bartender's anxious eyes. "Quiet night, Reuther?" he asked, cautiously moving a hand to his blaster.

Sadly, the old man shook his head. "This is a desolate place when the Children of Najiba come home."

Familiar with the Children of Najiba, Ross scanned the night skies, well acquainted with the peculiar asteroid belt that had mysteriously claimed an orbit around the small planet. As ominous as the shattered rock moving above their heads, Ross discerned the somber tone of Reuther's voice. "Your message said it was urgent."

Muffled by the warm bodies crowded at the narrow blast door, a strangled scream suddenly erupted from the bar. The despondent cry fluctuated, a cacophony of sobs, which peaked above the violence of the storm.

"Just watch, my boy," Reuther cautioned. "I brought you here for a reason."

The crowd broke ranks, scattering away from the bulkhead frame. A Najib man, wearing the clumsy beige uniform of a port control steward, staggered from the bar, collapsing in the street. Cradled in his arms, he carried the slender, motionless body of a Twi'lek woman. Her pale, blue skin glistened with rain, faultless and smooth despite the cruelty of the shadows. With the delicate poise of a dancer, elegant arms swayed above her head, exaggerating the gentle arch of her neck and shoulders. Scantily clad in a faded tunic, her frail form convulsed in the steward's arms.

"That's Lathaam," Reuther began, "our port official, and that," he hesitated, "that used to be his woman, Arruna."

Ross shrugged the tension from his chest and shoulders, massaging a pinched nerve in his neck. "What happened?"

"Adalric Brandl happened," he replied evenly. "He blew in about 10 hours ago, demanding a ship with a pilot who could shoot as well as fly." Sighing, he added, "Well, you know the rule, Ross. When the Children of Najiba are home, no traffic on or off the planet. Lathaam, being the choob-head he is, made the mistake of informing Brandl of that fact." The anxious Najib rubbed the narrow ridge between his eyes. "Lathaam always did lack diplomacy skills."

"So Brandl killed the girl?"

"I ain't saying what he did." From the safety of the shadows, Reuther watched the lurid scene. Dubious, he averted his eyes, throwing his hands up with exasperation. "Truth is, Ross, Brandl never touched her. Never laid a hand on her," he puffed, "yet there she lies, dead. And there ain't nobody on the planet, not even you, who can tell me Brandl *didn't* do it."

"You've been living with the natives too long."

"I know what you're thinking, boy," Reuther scoffed. "Remember, I was once a bounty hunter, too. Brandl never pulled a blaster. Doesn't even have one." The bartender cleared his throat noisily, spitting into the wind. "His kind don't need blasters to kill."

Shuddering visibly, he mumbled, "He's a 10-96 if I ever saw one."

"A 10-96?" Ross whispered.

"If you don't know, you better look it up," Reuther snorted. "Your life may depend on it."

Ignoring the patriarchal cynicism, Ross crossed his arms over his chest. "Where do I fit into all of this?"

"Brandl wants a pilot who can handle himself. I told him I knew a dozen or more suicide jocks who would come through the asteroids just, to make an easy 1,000 credits ... then I told him about you."

"Come on, Reuther," Ross snorted musically. "One man comes along and has the whole town running scared? Whatever happened to your militia?"

"Is that what it's called?" Reuther scoffed. Staring at the backs of the prying mob, he spat, "Farmers! All of them! Eager to bite every stranger, but afraid of stepping on their own tails. Look at them!" He stared into the small assembly gathered around the body. "It's easy to look into another man's misery and do nothing."

Grumbling among themselves, the crowd abruptly retreated into the street as a shadow moved from the back of the bar. Eclipsing the dim light radiating from the bulkhead, the stranger faltered in the doorway. "That'll be him," Reuther whispered. "I'll pay you 2,000 credits on top of whatever he offers you. Just get him off the planet!" Stepping back into the rain, he hesitated. "There's a bad noise about this one, Ross. Watch yourself."

Captivated by the peculiar events surrounding this outsider, Ross cautiously observed the reaction of the locals as Brandl swept past them, drawing the shadows in his wake. Struck by the unusual beauty of the stranger's face, the smuggler found it difficult to believe that such a man was capable of violence. Handsome, almost cavalier by appearance, Brandl's nose and chin were chiseled with stony nobility, polished by a quiet arrogance that aroused the smuggler's suspicions. Faded laugh lines framed a narrow mouth and thin lips.

Thick, dark waves of hair glistened with rain, interspersed with strands of white, which ran from his temples to the nape of his neck. As foreboding as the shadows of Brandl's face, the robe draped from his shoulders seemed to absorb the darkness about them, concealing any weapons and his hands from view. "Captain Thaddeus Ross?"

Wincing with mention of his first name, Ross brushed his duster aside, revealing his blaster and his hand poised over the heel.

"Adalric Brandl?" he replied curtly.

Cordial, a genteel smile played across Brandl's pale lips, drawing a sharp angle over his prominent cheekbones. "I'll be brief, Captain. I need transport to the Trulalis system."

"Trulalis? You could catch the local skipper for half of what I'm likely to charge. Private transports don't come cheap."

"Integrity comes without price, Captain Ross. The bar owner assured me that you were a man of integrity." Squaring his shoulders, Brandl probed the smuggler's calculating eyes. "I'm offering 5,000 credits for transport to Trulalis, where you will accompany me to the Kovit Settlement."

"I don't leave port for less than 6,000," Ross countered, narrowing his eyes. "If you want company, it'll cost you extra: 1,500 credits."

"Agreed," Brandl whispered. Graceful, his long fingers retrieved a sealed credit chit. "Three thousand now and the rest on completion of my business."

Eyeing the sealed chit, Ross gushed, "Right this way." The smuggler extended his arm toward the freighter's lowered ramp. "Kierra, prepare to raise ship."

"Well it's about time!" she hissed. "I thought my docking struts were going to take root here."

Ross cast a final glance to the bar, saluting Reuther and the others who were watching from the sanctuary of the shadows. Confidently pocketing the credit chit, he flashed a reassuring smile and jogged up the ramp. Initializing the hatch seal, he moved along the familiar corridor toward the flight compartment. The Corellian grinned impishly, listening to Kierra's vindictive voice, as she engaged their peculiar passenger.

"Who the hell are you?" she demanded. "Never mind where I am. I'm where I belong, but you --"

"Kierra," Ross whispered, "meet our new client."

Seething with the brunt of Brandl's initial arrogance, Kierra vehemently blustered, "*Halle metes chun, petchuk!*"

"*Koccic suing!*" Ross scolded, shocked by the scathing Old Corellian insult.

Pleasantly, Brandl returned his thanks for the rude statement and offered a challenge. "*Onna Tulle gush.*"

Before the droid intelligence could recoup for the invitation, Ross glared into one of her optical lenses. "That's enough!" he fired at her. "Open the power coupling and charge the main booster," he ordered. "Now, Kierra!"

Discharge static hissed over the internal comm, similar to the indignant gnashing of teeth. "Affirmative, boss," she replied.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Ross leaned against the interior hull wall, listening for the ignition of the ion engines. Focused on Brandl's insidious eyes, he whispered, "There aren't too many people who remember the Old Corellian dialect."

"In the course of my career, I've had to speak many languages." Cautiously, Brandl added, "I was am ... an actor."

"I don't usually transport passengers," Ross confessed. Stepping through the low bulkhead, he activated the interior corridor lamps. "You're welcome to use my quarters."

Brandl's gaze swept the length of the modest passenger cabin. Hesitant to enter, he paused in the bulkhead frame. "How long until we reach Trulalis?"

"An hour?" Ross shrugged dubiously. "I'll notify you when we arrive."

"Thank you, Captain, your hospitality is appreciated."

"Yeah, I bet it is," the Corellian mumbled under his breath. As the hatch automatically sealed behind him, he retraced his steps to the flight compartment. "Kierra, set the astrogation system for Trulalis."

"Check."

Sitting down in the acceleration chair, Ross quickly glanced over the flight console. "Okay, darling, bring up the emergency autopilot program we installed this morning."

"Not today, Ross," Kierra pouted. "I have a headache." Observing his reaction from several optical lenses, she dampened his fury, whining, "You forgot to cut the restraint servos, flyboy. So don't blame me for the glitch." A hushed snicker translated across the internal comm. "By the way, where'd you dig up the spook? He gives me the chills, Thadd."

"I told you not to call me that!" Ross hissed. Glaring into an optic sensor, he roughly booted the throttle, causing the freighter to shudder and slide on the pad.

"Gently, gently," Kierra cooed. Vexed by his dark mood, she added, "I hate it when you get this way. Your manners --"

"Never mind my manners!" Curbing his temper, he flipped a series of flight switches. The freighter shifted beneath him, resisting the planet's gravity as it rose from the external dock. "You just think about minding your manners," he scolded. Checking the data read-outs for the latest asteroid activity, the Corellian grumbled, "Brandl's paying 8,000 creds for this trip, that's almost half a load of spice. You could at least try to humor him."

"Whatever you say, boss."

"And while I have your attention, run a code check on a 10- 96."

"That's easy. It's listed by Imperial enforcement protocol as a mentally imbalanced person."

"No, there's got to be something more to it," he contemplated. "There must be something else. Research the dead files on all 10-codes with that designation."

"That could take some time."

"Good!" he snapped. "I want every description for a 10-96, every-thing from Imperial databases to Old Republic records."

Resistantly, Kierra replied, "Affirmative, boss."

Accompanied by a low hum, the hyperdrive cue flashed intermittently, recalculating the jump to hyperspace. Checking the on-board systems, Ross observed hyperactivity in the library programs, where Kierra was researching the peculiar 10-code. "Stand by, hyperdrive engaging," he announced, piping into the ship-wide intercom. Bracing himself against the acceleration chair, Ross activated the motivator, propelling himself, his passenger, and his ship into the multicolored explosion of hyperspace.

* * *

In the lower cradle of the ship, Ross sat in the swivel gunner's chair, swinging side to side, absently strumming his fingers against the turret firing controls. He closed his eyes and massaged a muscle spasm in his shoulder, wincing as the clenched tendon tightened then released. Oblivious to the spectacular display of light and color beyond the narrow viewscreen, he relaxed against the cool leather brace, drifting into the serenity of sleep.

"You know," Kierra whispered, "you make the cutest faces when you're asleep."

"I wasn't asleep," he lied, suppressing a yawn.

"Well heads up, flyboy! I have some intriguing data for you."

Ross sat up, rubbing the circulation back into his ears. "Let's hear it."

"Well, it seems that your mysterious 10-96 dates back long before the 10-code setup even existed. Now, according to the description, and I must admit I'm perplexed, the 10-96 came from an Old Corellian word, *ke'dem*."

Staring into the hyperspace vortex, Ross mentally mouthed the word. "Go on."

"Go on?" Kierra snorted. "That's it! Since before the Empire, a 10-96 has had two definitions, an imbalanced person and a *ke'dem*." Hesitant, she whispered, "Now without overinflating your ego ... what's a *ke'dem*?"

"It's a variation of Old Corellian that means condemned or fallen."

"Well that would explain the modern terminology."

"Yeah," he whispered, "it would also explain what happened down there on the planet." The smuggler cupped his hands together, supporting his head and neck. "Kierra, darling, Adalric Brandl is a Jedi Knight."

"A Jedi? That *would* explain a lot of things." Momentarily, her optic sensor dimmed. "Stand by. Hyperdrive about to disengage. Three ... two ... one."

Leaning against the gunner's panic bar, Ross felt the vibration of the ion drives, set to ignite once the transition was complete. "Easy on the drive coils, Kierra."

"Aren't you coming to the bridge?" she asked.

"On my way," he replied, "but first I have to collect our unusual guest."

Blanketed by a protective cloud layer, the planet Trulalis was richly embellished with a spectacular landscape of verdant green. A mosaic of rolling grasslands, sprawling forests, and spacious oceans stood as an invitation to paradise for the space-weary traveler. Crisscrossed and separated at irregular intervals by feral wilderness, Trulalis offered innumerable flat fields for small transports to dock. Ross made a mental note to mark this planet as a potential checkpoint on his smuggling runs. A brief sensor scan pinpointed the closest, suitable landing field. Compensating for the subtle shifts on the ground surface, he set down near a small hamlet.

On the surface, Ross shouldered his travel tote and secured an extra power pack to his holster. From the top of the ramp, he hesitated in the corridor, glimpsing Brandl from the corner of his eye. The eccentric Jedi was waiting for him outside on the trail, shadowed by the towering visage of the black trees. A seemingly invincible statue, the strange man stood with solemn conviction, staring into the hazy silhouette of the late afternoon sun. "Kierra, I'm still not sure what Brandl's up to. Keep your eyes open."

"Keep your comlink open," she replied. "You know how I worry."

"That's my girl," the Corellian chuckled.

Testing the soft earth beneath his boots, Ross strolled up to the familiar silhouette of his passenger. For the first time since leaving Najiba, he noted that both of Brandl's hands were visible, one of them swathed haphazardly in a black bandage. Through gaps in the makeshift dressing, he saw the tender pink of raw flesh and yellow seepage draining into the thick fabric.

Before Ross could question him, Brandl turned and started along the trail.

"What did the Najib tell you about me?"

"He said you killed a Twi'lek girl," Ross blurted. After a moment he pressed, "Did you?"

The Jedi's reply was abrupt and forthright. "Yes." Brandl hesitated as the Corellian snorted reprovingly. "Please Captain, your contempt is small reward for a repentant pilgrim."

"You call murder a penance?" Ross spat.

"When it has become the least of one's crimes," the Jedi paused dramatically, "yes."

Brandl's apathy toward the woman's death was chilling, sending shudders throughout the Corellian's body. "How? You never touched her." Ross grasped Brandl's sleeve and pulled. "How did you do it!"

"I asphyxiated her."

"She suffocated? In an open room?"

"A sophisticated talent," Brandl sneered, "not meant for the faint of heart."

"You sound proud of yourself, Jedi!" Ross spat with contempt. "Makes you feel good to kill an innocent woman?"

"Evil springs from weakness and weakness from ambition; by this grand order every ambitious man is undone!" Deliberately, the Jedi challenged, "Tell me, Captain, you too are an ambitious man. Which of us is truly innocent?"

"Should I applaud now!" Ross taunted.

"If you wish!"

"Well before I hand over your accolades, tell me something. Was that a real line or just something you made up to ease your conscience?"

Petulant with the smuggler's indignation, Brandl turned on him. "If it's retribution you wish for me, Captain Ross, then I suggest you stay close at hand." Scowling furiously, he stared down his long nose. "You may yet have your satisfaction."

Provoked by the sinister edge in Brandl's voice, Ross drew his blaster. The Jedi apparently heard him, and spun around to face the blaster. Ross fired a three-round burst at the Jedi. Honed by several seasons as a bounty hunter, he

centered the bolts to explode in the square of Brandl's broad shoulders. Before the deadly energy could land their mark, Brandl deftly snatched a cylindrical object from his belt. Momentarily, a narrow shaft of white brilliance ignited from the base, feinting and parrying with the precise motions of the Jedi's wrists. Deflected by the lightsaber, the blaster bolts were harmlessly shot off into the field.

Aghast, Ross could only watch as the destructive rounds dissipated into oblivion. Abruptly, he felt the crushing pinch of invisible fingers clenched against his throat, constricting his airway and lungs. Choking, the smuggler dropped to his knees as the serene landscape of Trulalis blurred before him. Gradually, the sensation faded, leaving the Corellian gasping to catch his breath.

"There is one rule of theater that applies to real life, Captain Ross," Brandl declared. "*Only heroes die*. Villains and cowards are left to suffer." Turning his back on the panting pilot, he snarled, "Now come along."

Ross shook the haze from his vision. "Is that another line?" he slurred lethargically.

Brandl trembled, visibly drained as he disengaged the lightsaber with required effort. "Not just a line, Captain, but an astute warning to the less-than-humble pilgrim." Securing the lightsaber to his belt, the Jedi momentarily scanned the pale skies. "The settlement is less than a kilometer away. We had best move along. It will be dark soon."

Swearing off bruises, Ross bitterly wedged his pack against his shoulder and jammed his blaster into the holster. Quickly brushing past Brandl, he hissed, "Can't imagine why you'd be afraid of the dark."

Nestled within the dominant embrace of a mountain range, Kovit was well-protected from the harsh weather conditions of the northern highlands and the wind-swept plains of the coastal region. Staring down the mound into the modest farming community, Ross could vaguely discern movement in the dusty streets. Drawn by diminutive banthas, wagons creaked through the wide avenues. Dozens of people walked the streets, pausing to chat with a neighbor

or to haggle over the local street merchant's wares. From a side alley, three boys grunted and sweated behind a battered landspeeder, coaxing the vehicle's engines to briefly ignite. Nearby, above the sporadic choke of the repulsorcraft, laughter betrayed a trio of children playing with an obsolete astromech droid.

Brandl hesitated at the crest of the mound, staring down into the settlement, as if reconsidering his options. Wilted, the Jedi's shoulders exposed a reluctance to continue. "Where are you from, Captain Ross?"

Startled by the abrupt question, Ross stammered, "Corellia originally."

"Do you find returning there difficult?"

"Homecomings are always hard." The Corellian shrugged, pursing his lips doubtfully. "At least for some of us."

Without further reply, Brandl continued down the trail, deliberately slowing his stride. Vacillating, he stepped through the settlement gates, as if expecting some invisible force field to bar his path. Nostalgically passing through the prudent rows of farm cottages, the Jedi admired the mastery of native architecture, as sculpted from the indigenous lumber. Herb gardens and prized flower beds adorned the private lawns, each tenderly manicured and maintained with fastidious care. As they approached the dry, dusty oval of the settlement common, Brandl covered his eyes, protecting them from the fading sun, as he stared into the rich, agricultural outback of the settlement, which extended far beyond the limits of the community to the base of the mountains themselves.

From the near center of Kovit, a macabre specter of architecture loomed above the rustic rooftops. Flyaway buttresses supported the main construction of the theater, unfurling like stony wings from the base. Packed with chalk-white limestone, the obelisk was unequivocally straight, seeming to elongate into the obscuring skies. Established intentionally in the heart of the settlement, the theater captured the waning rays of the sun, momentarily stealing the glory from the picturesque village. There was a somber sense of

belonging that drew Brandl toward the structure, ignoring the startled glares of the settlement denizens.

As they passed through the outskirts of the community, Ross nervously observed a makeshift hangar and the crude snout of a Z-95 jutting from the narrow bay doors. The starfighter appeared operational, though crowded by its diminutive shelter, and eager for a skirmish. Distracted by the presence of strangers, several men gathered just beyond the shadows of the small livery, watching intently.

Thumbing the restraint from his blaster, Ross cautiously whispered, "Your adoring fans?"

"Neighbors, patrons, old friends." Brandl abruptly paused in the street, as if awakening from an illusion. "But that was another lifetime."

"Where do they stand in this lifetime?" the smuggler growled.

"Strangers."

Weaving through the haze of the fragrant gardens surrounding the theater courtyard, a woman and a young boy moved along the grainy, stone paths. The echo of their voices chimed with laughter as a private joke was shared between them. Brandl watched intently as they walked through the haze and into the dusty streets.

Fiery, auburn spirals cascaded from the woman's head, crowning her oval face. Unusually pale skin flushed in the faded brilliance, betraying an aversion to excessive sunlight. Tall but gangly, the boy was no older than 11 or 12 years. Broad shoulders framed his upper torso, seemingly too heavy for his slender form. Coordinated and rhythmic, his long legs showed nothing less than the promise of sharp, steady growth.

Startled by the dark apparition of Brandl, the woman hesitated and stood motionless in the street, meeting the Jedi's friendless eyes. .

The smile parting her full lips was quickly forgotten. Puzzled by her peculiar behavior, the child swept his gaze from her stony face to Brandl. Registering

nothing more than a stranger, the boy leaned over his mother's arm and whispered something in her ear.

Obviously distraught, she pulled the child snugly against her and hurriedly continued their trek across the common. Brandl sighed remorsefully, then without explanation, resumed his walk toward the old theater. Beyond the archaic gate a decade or more of wild flowers had claimed the inner recesses of the theater yard, staggering the once straight path to the massive bulkhead doors. Residing over the darkened antechamber, bronze statues and sculpted metalwork lined the interior corridor.

Adalric Brandl moved gracefully into these familiar shadows, intuitively stalking the darkened corridors and spacious hallways beyond. The hollow shell of his memories traced the outlines and silhouettes of each molded tapestry, a display case of tarnished prop swords and shields, and finally the grand hall, where past audiences had come to experience the stage productions.

Ignoring the Corellian behind him, Brandl quickened his steps, moving into the immense auditorium. Deafening, the familiar resonating of applause and encouragement thundered and echoed inside his ears; but this illusion was short-lived. There was no audience to applaud, no actors to bow, no stage settings, nor props as he remembered them. The yawning mouth of the stage was disgracefully bare.

"Who is there?" a voice whispered from the darkness.

Brandl faltered, supporting himself in the elaborately carved doorway.

A thin, frail figure emerged from the darkness of the inner aisle. "Come closer," he gently commanded.

From the shadows along the back wall, Ross scanned the theater for other signs of movement. Thumbing the restraint from his blaster, he waited quietly in the musty wings of the chamber as Brandl continued into the hall toward the shadowy form.

"Adalric Brandl, is that you?" the old man croaked pleasantly.

"Master Otias," Brandl whispered, kneeling at his mentor's feet. "I am ashamed that you care to remember me."

Otias ignited a glow rod, casting a warm beam of light across his scaling face. He was dressed in a faded gray tunic, stained with lamp oil and sweat. The veins and muscles of his arms were pronounced and defined, built up from a lifetime of toil and lean with age. Clouded gray eyes were nearly imperceptible against a splash of dark spots and freckles. "Since when did shame ever come between an actor and his task director?" Brushing a trembling hand through his thinning silver mane, Otias whispered, "It's been 12 long years, Adalric. What brings you back to this stage?"

"Master O--" Brandl fell silent, cutting himself short.

"Come, come lad ... there is nothing more obvious than an actor with a need to confess."

Abruptly, Brandl cowered beneath the glow rod. "I ... I live my life ... in a whirlwind!"

Dignified, Otias beamed proudly, recognizing the famous line. "Old Soveryn's final words of the fourth act. How closely you've come to rivalling his life." Resigned, the aging taskmaster sighed, a lifetime of exhaustion evident by his labored breathing. "Actors are granted license to live a thousand lives, Adalric; but you, you chose to live a thousand lies. If you have come to me as your advocate then speak from your heart, not from the void of a tragic character who has never been born."

Spittle flying from the corners of his mouth, Brandl raged, "I cannot!"

"Every tragic figure is tainted by a flaw, possessed by a need to save the world or himself from some unpardonable crime. No man can set himself before humanity and judge it, not without himself being judged." Otias gently unwrapped the makeshift bandage swathed about on Brandl's left hand, wincing at the severity of the burn. The lightsaber's cauterizing bite was undeniable. "When we pursue shadows, we are destined to find the darkness." Staring into Brandl's face, Otias whispered, "And as you well know, the dark side has always had its price."

"What happened to me?" Brandl, implored.

"You stared into the collective pith of all beings and judged it, without first looking into your own heart. Frustrated, you went looking for the tragic flaw without much success. When the Emperor came calling, you couldn't resist!" Otias whispered, "No one knows darkness better than a Jedi Knight, and no one was more suited to play such a role than you."

"I killed a woman!" Brandl gasped. "Suffocated her! I could feel her heart in my hand ... in my mind! And I squeezed and squeezed --"

"You've killed many," Otias accused. "The Emperor has no blood on his hands; but he keeps an army of others who do."

"Otias, please, help me find the way."

"The way of the Force brings balance to the anarchy of life; but you Adalric," he shook his head reprovably, "you didn't want balance. Your pride was so great and despite my warnings, you went in search of the unalienable crime, which inevitably separates the hero from the indigent masses. And you found it, didn't you?"

Gasping for breath, Brandl croaked, "Yes! It was within me, within my black heart the whole time."

"It lies within all of us," Otias whispered, "if we dare to see." Exhausted, he sighed bitterly, again brushing a hand through his thinning hair. "I cannot vindicate you of the evil that you have brought upon yourself, an evil that you have wielded in the name of the Emperor for so long. I've spent the last decade watching, waiting for your return, rehearsing what I would say to you." Sadly, he whispered, "What you ask, I cannot give you. There can be no redemption for your crimes. The dead cannot forgive." Extinguishing the lamp, Otias turned his back on the distraught Jedi and moved away toward the stage.

Brandl slowly turned from the familiar silhouette, stung by the reality of Otias's words. Pressing the damp bandage against his wounded palm, he stepped into the outer arena, moving into the darkened wings in the rear of the theater. Without comment, he retraced his steps through the spacious corridors, past

the archaic displays, and into the courtyard beyond the doors. Steeling himself against the violent images sparking through his mind, the Jedi surrendered to Trulalis's last waning sunlight, imagining that the impotent rays had the power to burn into his flesh.

Angrily, he fumbled beneath his robes, producing a large cylindrical object. Ross flinched momentarily, traumatized by his encounter with the Jedi's lightsaber. With recovering confidence, he noted that this object was much larger and was covered with minute control levers and data screens. As if wrenching the neck of an invisible foe, Brandl twisted the object before replacing it within his robes. Lightly, he heard the smuggler's footsteps behind him, moving with guarded discretion, as if to avoid disturbing his troubled thoughts. "I prefer your contempt, Captain," he whispered, his eyes flashing with violence. "Your pity disgusts me." Extending his long stride, he stormed out of the theater yard, unhindered by the thickened dust at his feet.

* * *

Framed by the dark cowl of the forest canopy, the *Kierra*'s ivory hull gleamed, a smooth, round tooth jutting from the heath. Guided by these moonlight reflections, Ross stumbled through the rutted trail, twisting his ankles against unseen rocks. "Kierra, lights!"

Squinting into the brilliant array of search beacons, the smuggler shivered, pulling the collar of his duster across his neck. A potent wind was descending from the high country, bringing with it the promise of rain. Inside the ramp corridor, Ross brushed a hand through his hair, reassured by the warmth flooding the freighter's interior. "Pump up the main boosters," he ordered with distraction, noting that Brandl had not followed him onto the ship.

Growing accustomed to the Jedi's erratic mood swings, Ross peered from the protection of the ramp door. Below him, standing at the foot of the ramp, Brandl stood motionless staring into the darkness as pale mists crawled over his shoulders and beneath his feet. "Brandl?" With his smuggler's sense aroused, Ross ordered, "Kierra, kill the exterior lamps."

"You can come out now," Brandl whispered, as the austere beacons were extinguished. "No one will harm you."

Ross pressed himself against the interior hull wall, propping his blaster and steadying his arm and shoulder to draw a clear shot. Hearing him, Brandl stared up into the darkened passage, disarming the Corellian with his sharp gaze. As the lanky figure of a boy emerged from the heath, Ross could feel the tension fade and stepped off the ramp, recognizing the child from their brief encounter in the settlement. Dressed in dark green clothes to match the forest at night, the child's face was flushed and sweated. Cautiously, he approached the two men and the freighter.

Awed by the sight of Brandl, enshrouded by darkness, yet haloed by the moon, the child moved gingerly toward the ship, compelled by an insatiable curiosity. He made no effort to shield his wonder, noting every measure of the figure before his eyes, as if committing his mere presence to memory. "It's true," the boy whispered. "You are a Jedi Knight."

"Who are you?" Brandl demanded, but there was no strength in words. Even Ross could detect the half lie of denial trembling in his voice.

Handsome, the child grinned, turning his face up to meet his father's eyes. "Don't you know me?" he asked. Staring intently at the lightsaber swinging from the Jedi's belt, the boy angrily cried, "You named me! Jaalib, remember?" Recovering his manners, he rubbed the toe of his shoe into the yielding earth. "My last name is Brandl too."

Gently, Brandl caressed the boy's hair and cheeks, feeling the smooth skin beneath his fingertips. It was a peculiar sensation, which fired every nerve across his body. Despite the tenderness of that caress, Ross felt a sense of unease crawling into his belly.

"Is that a real lightsaber? I've never seen one." Chatty, the youngster added, "I've seen props for the stage, but ..." His soft, tenor voice fluttered, prey to the silence as Brandl handed the weapon to him. Staring at it, Jaalib reached hesitantly for the lightsaber, then dropped his hand.

"Don't be afraid," Brandl urged.

"I'm not afraid," Jaalib said with confidence, taking his father's hand, rather than the lightsaber. A thin film of tears glistened in the corner of his eyes. Swallowing the emotion, Jaalib whispered, "I've come to warn you. I heard Menges and the others talking. They're angry that you came back to the settlement. Mother doesn't think they'll do anything; but I know that Menges has a ship."

Overhearing the boy, Ross snapped, "Kierra, check the sensors!"

Abruptly, the interior corridor lights went dark. "I suggest that you all duck!"

A tremendous explosion erupted near the aft of the ship and forest perimeter, accompanied by the afterburn blast of an outgoing starfighter. Dodging churned up roots, debris, and stone particles, Ross slid under the ramp, diving for cover beneath the freighter's hull. Sparks and molten debris scattered about his head and shoulders, singeing his clothing and hair. Thrashing wildly, he swiped the heated material from his skin. Nearby, Brandl was helping the frightened boy to his feet, whispering encouraging words to the traumatized child.

"Damage report."

"They got us, boss," Kierra pined. "Concussion missile." There was a brief pause as she analyzed the incoming data. "Shields are out. Engines are at 70 percent. There's a good chance the ion coils may seize if we push them too far."

"Can we lift off?"

"With you at the reins, flyboy," she chuckled, "anything's possible."

Protectively embracing the boy against him, Brandl whispered, "As long as we don't make ourselves known, he will pass."

"Look," Ross barked, "this is all very touching, but that last pass was just to get an approximate location. Next time --" he snorted anxiously, "forget it, I'm not waiting around for next time. Let's scratch gravel, now!"

Agitated by the sudden turn of events, Brandl cupped the boy's face in his hands. "Does your mother know you're here?"

"No."

"Then ..." Brandl stammered, "how did you know?"

Playfully holding his father's hands, Jaalib smiled, "Otias told me the truth a long time ago. He let me watch the holos of your stage work. Mother didn't like it at first, but she came with me and she cried the whole time." Sadly, the boy glanced away, avoiding Brandl's eyes. "When we saw you in the settlement common, as soon as we got home she started to cry. So I knew it was you." Staring at Ross, the boy frowned, knowing the inevitable parting was soon at hand. "Will you ever come home?"

Brandl cradled Jaalib's smooth cheeks and gently kissed the child's forehead. "I can make no promises."

Jaalib forced a smile. "I understand. Otias said that you had other important roles to play, parts that a small world like Trulalis could never offer." Clinging to his father's presence, the boy whispered, "When I'm old enough, I'm going to act offworld too. Otias said that he would help." He hesitated. "I want to be as great as you are, father." The thin film of tears returned, threatening to spill over his cheeks. "I won't ever forget you." Using the thick canopy of the forest as a shield, Jaalib sprinted down the trail and vanished into the night shadows.

"They never told him the truth," Brandl swallowed desperately, fighting back his emotions.

"Why didn't you tell him?" Ross snarled, sealing the outer hatch.

"You give me credit for courage? A man of courage is a man of conviction, Captain Ross." Brushing past the Corellian, the Jedi whispered, "I lost mine the moment I chose to believe in old legends."

Throwing himself into the acceleration seat, Ross frantically began throwing the flight controls. His hands moved diligently across the console with consummate skill. Roused by the threat of a hostile starfighter swinging in on the sensor scope, he initialized the booster ignition, cradling the crippled ship in his hands. A low whine engulfed the flight cabin in static echoes and

vibrations as the ion drive labored to lift the freighter. The metallic rattle of the deck plates reverberated through every corridor and in the spacious cargo bay.

"Oh," Kierra groaned, "that sounds bad."

"Never mind how it sounds, get started on bringing the shield generators on line!" Struggling to maintain control of the freighter, Ross brawled with the partially ionized throttle, maximizing the power output through the damaged engine.

"The hard part will be getting through the atmosphere," Brandl whispered, glancing over the readout screens.

"We may never get off the ground!" Ross grumbled. "Kierra, where is he?"

"One Z-95 Headhunter, headed right for us and according to my readings, the ship exceeds the normal weight ratio for its class."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning more concussion missiles. He's fully loaded."

"Power up the main sentry turret," Ross mumbled, concentrating on the hampered freighter. "When will the shield generator come online?"

"Give me five more minutes. Hydraulic pressure is building to functional levels."

"Well hurry it along. At this rate, we won't even get into space before he catches us." Ross stared into the underlying blanket of the lower atmosphere, shrouding his departure in the frenzy of night mist. "What can you do about fixing the ion drive?"

"Think happy thoughts," Kierra replied. "We have no cargo. We have no surplus material. And," she added with a hint of feminine pride, "this ship has always been under its weight ratio. We're lighter than a Gamorrean brain sack."

"How long before he intercepts us?"

"Let's just say I'm putting up the shields now."

Abruptly, the modified light freighter shook with the impact concussion of another direct hit. Bucking beneath the powerful blow, the *Kierra* drifted beneath the cloud cover as the destructive energy ricocheted over the aft shields, dissipating harmlessly against the hull.

"Damage?" Ross panted.

"The shields took it," Kierra replied wearily, still accessing the information from her multiple systems. "But the hydraulic level is already dropping. We won't survive much more of that."

Angling across the stratosphere, the Headhunter aggressively continued its pursuit. Hampered by the thickened atmosphere of Trulalis, it swayed from side to side, approaching for another strafing run.

Arming the lower turret, Kierra interfaced with the sentry gun, timing a sporadic burst across the forefront of the attacking ship. Not expecting retaliation from the crippled freighter, the fighter stuttered through the atmosphere, its left wing section erupting into flames. Avoiding the turret's deadly accuracy, the Z-95 dropped back, barreling out of range. "That should keep his head down for a while."

"Not long enough," Ross argued. Eluding Brandl's cautious eye, he grumbled, "If there's something in your Jedi survival book, now's the time to spring it."

Brandl nodded, his face notably drained and haggard. Reaching inside the fold of his robe, he again produced the peculiar capsule. The cylindrical-shaped device was cleverly fitted for concealment as a hydrospanner or mechanic's tool. Staring at the object, Ross recognized it from their brief excursion at the theater. As he watched, fascinated, the control head flashed intermittently from a hidden power cell.

"What's that?" Kierra crooned. Intrigued by the odd unit, her optical orb brightened, extending the focus on the transmitter.

"It's a transponder," Brandl replied. "And it's been transmitting for nearly an hour." The Jedi sighed with effort, leaning against the broad back of the acceleration chair. In the harsh light of the flight cabin, his arrogance could not

hide the gaunt cheeks and stress lines that had begun eroding the handsome visage of a once proud man. The morbid signs of resignation and surrender were easily read in his noble face.

Without warning, the Headhunter broke off the chase, banking sharply toward the planet. Its aft engines betrayed haste, glowing with the throttle thrown full open as the fighter vanished into the dense cloud cover above the planet. Suspicious, Ross glared at Brandl, feeling the constriction of fear in his throat. "What's the catch?"

"You had better prepare yourself," Brandl whispered.

The proximity alarms blared, sending a deafening echo into the freighter's corridor and accessways. Exploding with tactical data and imminent warnings of ship-to-ship collision, the sensors closed on the gigantic structure of the massive Imperial Star Destroyer, newly emerged from hyperspace.

As the Star Destroyer moved across the viewscreen only a scant 100 meters from him, Ross slumped against the back of his chair, defeated before one shot could be fired. Slowly, scores of turbolaser batteries turned on them, targeting his freighter. Still hampered by a faulty ion drive, the *Kierra* bucked and lurched toward the Star Destroyer.

"Have they got us?" Ross moaned, massaging his eyes and fore-head.

Kierra snickered nervously. "Does Boba Fett enjoy his job?"

"Could we outrun them?"

"We couldn't even out-think them at this point, flyboy. They've got us locked in tight."

Resting his head and arms against the flight console, Ross sighed, accepting the inevitable. "You've managed to sign my death warrant!"

"On the contrary, I've guaranteed your reprieve." The Jedi's mouth hinted at a sly grin.

"I have a price on my head! An Imperial bounty!"

"You are about to discover that the Emperor is quite generous, especially when one of his citizens sees fit to return his property."

"You're one of the Emperor's freaks?" Ross argued. "What were you doing on Najiba ... You were running!" Staring at the Imperial Star Destroyer, he gasped, "You were running from the Empire? Why?"

"It no longer matters," Brandl whispered. "The time has come to confront the darkness and forsake it for what it is ... just so many shadows."

"Well some shadows can kill!"

As they passed into the outer docking field, the freighter was engulfed in darkness. "Then let all be perfected in death."

Prying the forward deck plate from the flight console, Ross quickly unbuckled his blaster, stashing the belt inside with a hidden cache of thermal detonators and other illegal weaponry. Motivated by Imperial penalties for unauthorized equipment and arms, he retreated to a general utility closet in the corridor beyond the command cabin. Retrieving a small stash of blaster power packs, the flustered Corellian returned to the bridge to find Brandl peering curiously into the hidden compartment. "Kierra, make certain the shield housing is intact. I don't want them finding your power cell."

"A girl's got to have her privacy," she quipped. "Good thinking, boss."

Closing the hidden panel, Ross tripped the contamination seal. If the Imperial sensors went over the ship, they would bypass this area for contaminated mechanic's tools. Abruptly, the interior lights fluctuated as the power levels dropped, shifting to auxiliary mode. "All clear," Ross hollered.

"I've switched over my power couplings to a subordinate cell. Even if they do find my main generator, they won't know what it is. But," she teased, "that means I can't eavesdrop over the comlink or scan the perimeter!"

"For your own safety," Brandl began, "I advise you not to mention Trulalis."

Remembering Brandl's wife and son back on the planet, Ross nodded pensively. "Kierra, sweep all records and logs since we left Najiba, input data from a previous job. Where does that put us?"

"We dropped that baby tris off on Tatooine, remember?"

"Don't remind me," Ross replied wistfully. "Just erase the reasons and submit an addendum about engine trouble above Trulalis."

"Right, boss."

"And Kierra? Lose yourself. They'll probably go over every centimeter of this ship."

"Is that a hint of concern in your voice, flyboy?"

"Yeah," he grumbled. Shrugging the tension menacing his shoulders, he walked through the corridor to the hatch and deactivated the seal.

Before the ramp could fully lower two Imperial stormtroopers charged aboard the ship, leveling their weapons at Ross, shoving him against the hull wall. The force of the blow knocked the wind from his lungs and the Corellian doubled over, coughing desperately to catch his breath. Twenty or more stormtroopers were staggered outside the freighter, their weapons pointing into the ramp lift, trained on the dark Jedi.

Undaunted by the show of Imperial might, Brandl scanned the parade of white-on-black armor, until he met the familiar face of an Imperial officer beyond the periphery of armed soldiers. Stepping aside, the Jedi allowed three stormtroopers to rush past him into the ship.

"I trust you will cooperate," the officer announced. Pompously, he adjusted the brim of his black cap. "If not for your own sake, then for the sake of your companion."

Disguising a hint of defeatism with dramatic poise, the Jedi proclaimed, "How can I cooperate?"

"Think nothing. Do nothing. Say nothing until you are told."

Offering a hand to the panting smuggler, Brandl grinned slyly, his back to the Imperial entourage. "Captain Grendahl, you'll find that I do nothing very well."

Grendahl's face was menacing. "We're scheduled to rendezvous with the *Interrogator* within the hour. Inquisitor Tremayne is eager to see you again, Lord Brandl ... very eager." Pointing to Ross, Grendahl demanded, "Take him to the isolation area for questioning." Changing his demure with obvious fraudulence, Grendahl tipped his hat with mocking respect, "Please, Lord Brandl, your quarters have been prepared."

* * *

Massaging the bruises swelling on his chest and arms, Ross leaned his head against the antiseptically clean wall of the holding cell. Several hours had slowly passed, marked with isolated sessions of routine questioning. Abruptly, the door opened, admitting two stormtroopers and Captain Grendahl, who he recognized from the hangar bay. Pleasantly, the Imperial officer sat down across from him, setting a large datapad on the table between them. "Do you recognize this gentleman?" he asked, keying up a picture on the small screen.

Ross laughed softly, recognizing the distinguished curves of his own face. "Would it help if I said I didn't?"

Grendahl smiled generously. "No." Folding his hands against the table top, he sneered, "Interfering with an Imperial investigation is a crime punishable with imprisonment."

"An Imperial investigation?" Ross jeered. "It was a fight, and not a fair one," he argued. "Two stormtroopers against a Jawa, come on!"

"Never mind the odds," Grendahl replied evenly. "You still interfered; however ..."

"However?" the Corellian scoffed, mocking the insipid officer.

"However, I am authorized to extend a generous amnesty if you will cooperate and answer a few questions."

"Amnesty?" Ross chuckled. He scratched his head, agitated. "Imperial amnesty is about as valuable as a Wookiee dwarf with no hair."

Grendahl frowned, covering his dismay with shrewd professionalism. "You have the Emperor's guarantee, Captain Ross. Help us with one short investigation and you will be cleared of all charges."

Stalling, Ross demanded, "He owes me money!"

"I can't promise you will get it," Grendahl countered, "but you are entitled to 10,000 credits." Grinning malevolently, he watched the smuggler's startled reaction. "That's 10% of the bounty offered for Brandl's safe return."

Intrigued, Ross leaned over the edge of table. "You mean to say Brandl's worth 100,000 credits?"

Anxious to keep the smuggler's attention, Grendahl silently acknowledged the query. "You're lucky to even be alive, Captain Ross. Adalric Brandl is highly unstable, capable of inconceivable atrocities. However, his value to the Emperor makes him an essential resource. Where did you find him?"

"Najiba."

Grendahl's face darkened, perplexed. "Najiba has stringent ordinances restricting traffic through the asteroid belt."

"By the time I got there," Ross explained, "no one cared about port control penalties. They just wanted him off the planet."

"Was there trouble? Was anyone harmed?"

The Corellian shrugged casually. "I never left my ship," he lied, "so I can't really say."

"And where were you going?"

"Mos Eisley, but," Ross laughed, "considering my last visit, I only planned to take him as far as Anchorhead. After that, he was on his own."

"Did he ever mention his connection with the Emperor?"

"Not until you had us in the tractor beam."

"The damage to your ship?"

"We were attacked by pirates," Ross replied rhythmically. "My hyperdrive failed and we just barely managed to arrive here."

Grendahl hesitated. "You keep accurate ship records, Captain Ross. Your flight log and manifests substantiate your story."

"Call it a throwback to my bounty hunting days," Ross offered. "If you wanted your expenses, exact documentation was a necessity."

Tentatively peering into the room, a junior-grade lieutenant saluted Grendahl, ignoring the prisoner with him. "Captain Grendahl, sir, Admiral Etnam requests your presence on the bridge immediately, sir. Lord Brandl has been given the task of escorting the civilian to his ship."

"What!"

Ross concealed a sly grin behind the collar of his duster. Feigning surprise, he rose from the chair and leaned against the glossy table, pondering how Brandl managed to arrange this escort.

"Captain Grendahl," the lieutenant whispered, appalled by the outburst.

"Admiral Etnam's instructions were quite specific. He is anxious to rendezvous with High Inquisitor Tremayne." Being Etnam's personal aide and fearing no reprisals from Grendahl, he nodded to the nearest stormtrooper and whispered, "Retrieve the prisoner."

Grendahl struggled to retain his composure, chafed by Brandl's influence, which despite his moment of dishonor to the Emperor, still held weight, even with the intrepid character of Admiral Etnam. Nostrils flared, he hissed between grit teeth, "Very well." Then to re-establish his ego in the company of those under his command, he straightened his hunched shoulders, erasing the sour scowl from his face. "You're free to go, Captain Ross," he growled. "The Emperor's clemency can be bountiful and far-reaching; but the next time you meddle with an Imperial investigation," he paused, "you may find yourself at the wrong end of Imperial justice." Folding his hands behind his back, Grendahl

started up the corridor. "Remember that the next time you consider beating the odds."

Over the polished shoulders of several stormtroopers, Brandl watched Grendahl's retreating back. Sneering behind the Imperial officer, the Jedi sniffed disdainfully as he led the smuggler into the corridor. "Are you a superstitious man, Captain Ross?"

Preoccupied by the armed escort behind them, Ross whispered, "My grandfather used to say that superstition was the foundation of a weak mind."

"Then we are surely doomed, for the basis of our civilization lays in the hands of high priests, shamans, and monks." Brandl laughed with genuine good nature. There was a spark of emotion betrayed by the brilliance of his eyes and Ross noted the deepening of the laugh lines framing his mouth. Adalric Brandl was in good spirit. "Your grandfather was a wise man."

Ross shrugged off the compliment. "Just another smuggler who found himself on the wrong end of Imperial justice." He sniffed, recalling Grendahl's threat. "That's why I became a bounty hunter, hoping to avoid what happened to him."

"And then?"

"And then I got bored. Guess it wasn't meant to be."

"We spend nearly the whole of our lives searching for the appropriate role that will mark the end of our existence with some moment of glory, ignoring the fact that fame and reputation are but mere perfumes of virtue. They never last."

"Is that another line?" Ross teased.

"Acting is a profound education in human nature and that is why I became so obsessed; but as my intellect improved, my morals failed and I became the very thing I most despised."

"And what was that?"

"Human. I was not a king, not a hero, not a god. Just a man trapped in the passion of the play."

"So what happens now?" Ross probed.

"My life has been one continuous drama," Brandl whispered, "a tragic one, I'm afraid. And I have stumbled through it, scene by scene, act by act, like some terrified neophyte. Tonight, Fortune calls for the final exit. I can no longer live the lie."

"You're going back to the Emperor, aren't you? After what he's done to you?"

"He did nothing but point in a general direction. I chose to go and do his bidding."

"What about your family? Your boy? What if the Emperor ever found out?"

"I assure you; no harm will befall them." Euphorically, he sighed, "They will be safe."

Ross believed him. There was a certainty about the Jedi that went beyond the sinister shadows that had once kept the two men at odds with each other. But the smuggler's conscience demanded a bit more for security. "How can you be sure?"

"I've never been more certain in my life." Placing a credit chit in the smuggler's hand, he closed Ross's fingers over it. Ross noticed another object in Brandl's hand, one which the Jedi tried to conceal when he folded his hands together over it. "The chit is the remainder of what I owe you and the Emperor's compulsory fee for capturing a dangerous renegade." He grinned malevolently, amused by his own sarcasm.

Slipping the chit in his duster pocket, Ross noticed the spherical, metallic shape beneath Brandl's hands, and noted the raspy acid eraser etched into the explosive where the serial trace markers had been removed. Eyes wild with the revelation, he stared into Brandl's tranquil face.

"Consider all debts paid," the Jedi whispered. Turning curtly on his heels, he retreated in the hangar corridor with the escort in tow.

Ross hurried up the ramp, rush sealing the corridor hatch. "Kierra!" he hissed, sprinting through the access tunnel into the flight cabin. "Kierra, wake up!"

"What do you mean wake up!" she snapped. "The engines have been online and waiting for the last hour. I even managed to knock one of the ion coils in place by popping the shield housing." She snorted, causing an erratic hiccup over the comm. "What's the rush? The main databanks were clean and according to this little astromech they had on board --"

"Never mind!" Ross shouted, strapping himself into the acceleration chair. "Brandl has one of my thermal detonators and I think he plans to --"

A muffled explosion reverberated through the docking corridors, blowing smoke and debris into the auxiliary bay. Piercing, high-pitched alarms began to blare, alerting medics and technicians to the area. Amid the chaos of shouting voices, the klaxons, and the sound of armored feet rushing to secure the area, the *Kierra* momentarily hovered above the flight pad. Several smaller explosions echoed from the passage, rattling TIE fighters and shuttle craft in the nearby racks.

Bewildered, Kierra gasped, "What would ever possess him to pull such a stunt?"

"He had to protect his family," the smuggler replied wearily.

"But with him dead, there's no guarantee the Empire won't find them. Then again," she mused aloud, "there's no guarantee the Empire will even look for them." Flustered by the infinite innuendoes, she quipped, "I'm just glad it's over."

"But it's not," he whispered. Banking sharply over an array of TIE fighters and ejector racks, Ross guided the *Kierra* out of the launch bay, repeatedly throttling the labored engines. "Brandl might have made his final exit; but the play is far from over ... for us ... or his family." The Corellian grinned nostalgically. Mesmerized by the verdant face of Trulalis, he watched the planet rotate before him, physically unmarred, innocently unaware, momentarily unchanged. He sighed, his smuggler's sense oddly at peace. There were no more shadows.

Casually resetting the astrogation system for Najiba, he braced himself as the *Kierra* stuttered across the open void and then vanished into the translucent brilliance of hyperspace.

HoloNet News Report:

Imperial Registration Program

Good news has come to the citizens of Lothal. The Outer Rim planet has been granted the coveted opportunity to participate in a new Imperial Registration Program. Not only will this initiative bolster the local economy by ensuring that all trade is authorized by the Empire, but it will also threaten the ability of devious black market traders to cut into the profits of law-abiding tax-paying Imperial subjects, like you.

Participating residents are also entitled to the benefits of the Galactic Farm Exchange, a new government program that will pay top value credits for any land sold to the Empire. Don't be left behind. Contact your local government office for more details.

This has been Alton Castle, with the only news that matters: the HoloNet News.

Wookiee Revolt Quelled on Kashyyyk

Top-story of the day for the HoloNet News: The Imperial 212th Attack Battalion, led by the brave General Kaada has successfully put down a Wookiee revolt on the planet of Kashyyyk.

As your safety is the Empire's top priority, civilian travel to the Mid Rim planet will be put on restriction, and access will only be granted for official government business.

Your Empire thanks you!

Lothal Jobless Rates Hit All-time Low

This is Alton Castle for the only news you need: the HoloNet News.

Jobless rates are at an all-time low as a result of the Empire's successful Citizen Registration Program. In exchange for access to a few personal details, local Imperial subjects have been matched with the best employment opportunities

the Empire has to offer. A large number of participants have been offered coveted positions at the Sienar Fleet Systems factory on Lothal.

When asked about the thriving industry on her planet, Governor Arinda Price commented "this only demonstrates the power of what can happen when Imperial interests are allowed to flourish in underdeveloped sectors." Well said, Governor Price.

Imperial Propaganda

(The following are textfiles on holo-posters placed in public areas in the Empire.)

Citizens:

Do not be fooled. You have heard accusations from REBELS. Accusations of "atrocities," of war crimes. They create these to deceive you. These are lies. Why would they lie to you unless they were desperate, unable to achieve victory?

THE EMPIRE IS VICTORIOUS ON ALL FRONTS!

REBELS?

The only ATROCITIES are theirs, as they destroy order and peace.

They began this WAR.
They are TERRORISTS.
They are CRIMINALS.
They are MURDERERS.

Trust your leaders. We defend you from those who would replace the New Order with anarchy and economic misery.
Support Your Empire.

THE EMPIRE IS VICTORIOUS ON ALL FRONTS!
SUPPORT THE EMPIRE.

Enlist in the military, donate goods, inform on suspects —today!

Don't suspect them. INFORM ON THEM!

THE EMPIRE IS VICTORIOUS ON ALL FRONTS!

"For every problem a solution must be found. It is the commander's duty to see that the objectives of the mission are obtained. He is personally responsible should the mission fail. If the objective is of importance, he is to succeed regardless of the method needed to obtain success. It is the commander's duty to see that success is obtained in accordance with the directives of the New Order."

— First axiom from Surface Operation Training Document 89, Officers' Section.

First Flight

The cockpit wraps around you, snug like the bodysuit you wear. Your feet slip into the control yokes automatically as techs fasten your flight webbing. Polyweave presses you into the shock couch. It molds against your back with a familiar grip.

The hatch snicks shut, and you are alone in the cockpit of your TIE. Comlink checks are an unnoticed routine, for your mind already clicks away — out there, where the skirmish has already begun. Your hands locked on the control rods are your only sign of battle nerves. You breathe deeply and relax them, trying for the gentle grip the TIE demands.

You're not a combat-rated pilot. Yet. There's only one way to get that square: by flying training missions under combat conditions. And this is your first time.

Your flight swoops from the *Victorious*, as it has on every other training run. But this time it's

different. Outside, starfighters swirl near a yellow-green planet. Lasers flash and blossoming explosions litter your flight path with flying debris. There's no time to move into a reserve position like the training officer had planned. Your TIE fighters are needed now. Your flight descends into the chaos of battle.

You snap-roll to stay with your leader, then slide right to bracket an X-wing with crossfire. You shoot and miss, rolling left to stay with the evading Rebel. The third salvo does it. You smile tightly as you evade the X-wing's debris.

Then, as suddenly as it started, the skirmish is over, Rebels escaping back to atmosphere. There are no orders to pursue, not this time. As you turn back to *Victorious*, you once again force yourself to relax an over-tense grip. There's no need for nerves, now. Your first combat training mission is over.

You survived.

THE WAR OF THE JEDI AND THE LEGIONS OF LETTOW

According to ancient records, the Jedi Order began on Tython, where Force-users tapped energy they called the Ashla, rejecting the lures of dark energy they called the Bogan. The Force Wars pitted adherents of the two creeds against each other, with the Ashla victorious. But a new conflict later arose between the Jedi—then based on Ossus—and a splinter group that called itself the Legions of Lettow. Little was known conclusively of this conflict until the discovery of the warrior Arden Lyn, who had survived twenty-five thousand years in stasis before being awakened by Imperial agents in 4 BBY. Lyn killed Inquisitor Ameesa Darys and fought off Antinnis Tremayne, but was maimed and captured by Torbin, who filed these selections from her debriefing:

The Jedi? Those handmaidens of the Ashla, the weak side of the Force? For ten thousand years they sat on Tython, staring into the stars and debating the nature of the cosmos, like a sewing circle of widows on Peshara. They did nothing. They were nothing. And without us they might have remained nothing.

The Jedi called the Bogan the dark side, but it is the side of vitality, of purpose. For what does life

do? Whatever it must to survive. It thrums with the desire to compete, to overcome, to better itself. Is that selfish? Those who must fight to survive would laugh at the question. Striving, besting—these desires can lead to hate and to war, it is true. But they also drive love, passion, and creation itself. That is the Bogan—the power that drives all life, from one-celled organisms to the leviathans of deep space.

The crowning joke, Xendor liked to say, was that we created the Jedi. It was the followers of the Bogan who gave the Order something to define itself against. It was the followers of the Bogan who drove the Order to shape itself into something other than a band of useless mystics. The Bogan gave the Jedi focus. It gave them purpose. It made them strong.

The wars of Tython were ancient history in my time. The Ashla and the Bogan fought, and the followers of the Bogan were defeated, and so they fled Tython. They went in many directions, heeding the Bogan's commands. In some places they discovered others who had been awakened by the Bogan, and learned their traditions. In others they served as teachers of their own ways. But always the message was the same: Go forth, survive, multiply, succeed.

...

In my time neither the Jedi nor we Renunciates used lightsabers. As part of their initiation, Padawans would forge their own steel blades and imbue them with the Force. And we would do the same.

An initiate Legionnaire would select a bar of high-carbon steel and shape it into a blade in the academy furnaces. The work was physical—annealing, quenching, and tempering. But it was also mental—an initiate hammering at hot steel to bend it and temper it would also be directing the Force to flow into the blade, forming the atoms into a lattice. This lattice would harden the blade and focus its edge, and prepare the blade to receive the crystal. Once blade and lattice were forged, the initiate would place the crystal in the hilt and marry the lattices, submerging so deeply in the Force that blade and crystal and wielder became one. The wielder would channel the energies of the Force through the crystal and into the blade, making

it glow with a nimbus of energy. But sometimes the forging would fail. Sometimes blade or crystal would shatter.

So, sometimes, would the initiate.

The Jedi called it the Great Schism—as tends to happen, later events forced it to be renamed the First Great Schism.

We didn't call it anything.

The worlds of the Core had joined together to form the Republic. But there were dangers beyond the Rim—the old empire of Xim, the slave kingdoms of the Hutts, and all manner of satrapies and dominions that your historians have forgotten.

After my investment as a Steel Hand of Palawa, I journeyed to Pelgrin to learn my fortune from the Oracle. This was before the Jedi expunged all knowledge of the Oracle, as they expunged so much that threatened their own power and prestige. I listened to the clockwork of the Oracle, and it told me many things. It told me that I should go to Ossus, where I would meet a man fair of face and clever of mind, and make him my master.

Ossus was the headquarters of the Jedi Order, which had left Tython to distance itself from the machinations of the growing Republic. I was welcomed there, as were other Followers of Palawa—we were considered fellow students of the Force. But the Order was already changing, growing doctrinaire. Its masters had fallen prey to the whispering of the Snouts—the Caamasi, those ancient beguilers of humanity. And they had fallen prey to the whispering of their own ambition—the collective ambition that seeks to deny that of the individual, so that the strong can be weakened and ruled more easily. By the time I arrived it was too late—the Order had set itself upon the path it would follow. But that is never apparent at the time. Only later can we discern the point when change became an impossibility.

At Ossus I met Xendor, the man of my vision. He was a Kashi Mer exile, a master of the Breath, as his people called the Force. He was respected in the Order, but vocal in his disapproval of its increasingly exclusionary ways. He first came to me because he wished to learn more about the Palawan martial arts, but he warned me that we should converse

quietly, away from the Jedi hierarchs. I don't know if he knew then that he would break with the Order and I would follow him. But I knew he would, just as I knew we would become friends and then lovers. The clockwork had already told me so.

At the beginning the break was peaceful. Xendor sought the hierarchs' permission to create an academy for the study of Force traditions—to tap the knowledge of the Chatos Academy and the Dai Bendu, the Palawa and the Kashi Mer, the Bogan and the Kel Dor sages, the Way of the Dark and the Protectorate of the Hidden. When they said no, as he'd known they would, he left the Order to found his own academy on Lettow. I accompanied him, and others followed—first by ones and twos, then in larger groups.

These newcomers took to calling themselves the Legions of Lettow, for they swore to defend us and our right to seek knowledge of the Force without the interference of the Jedi hierarchs and their pronouncements about what was correct and what was forbidden. The Jedi had sought to make the Force smaller, to cage it with rules and restrictions, but we knew that the Force was larger than any such mortal endeavors, and that it turned aside no one who was willing to learn its mysteries.

We had thought the Jedi would leave us alone, to seek our own path. But that was naive. The mere suggestion that there was another way to know the Force—our mere existence—was a threat to them. And so they branded us dissenters and schismatics and pushed us toward open conflict.

They formed armies against us, and so we had to do the same. Xendor, to his dismay, became our general. I served as his right hand. To spare the galaxy bloodshed and pain, we tried to stop the war in its earliest stages, by bringing the fight to Ossus, away from the Republic worlds. We failed, and the Jedi pursued us into the Core. Xendor tried to alert the Republic to its peril, to make the people see that the Jedi would cloak themselves as protectors and guardians as they waged war and took the levers of power. But he failed, and it was war—war on Chandrila and Brentaal, then Coruscant and Metellos.

Xendor died at Columus, as the Jedi and the armies they'd beguiled closed in. I wasn't there, but I saw it as if I had been.

Awdrysta Pina, known as the Green Blade, was the leader of the Jedi forces. He was a good choice—a grim man and bloody-minded. He'd spent little time on Ossus, preferring to travel the ancient space lanes beyond the Rim in search of knowledge. I admired him, and so did Xendor—he was better suited to be a Renunciate than a Jedi. Except Pina had a fatal flaw—a child-like belief that order and structure were the pillars of civilization, and a refusal to see that they could become civilization's chains. What we understood as freedom, he could only see as chaos.

Pina's legions had one advantage over ours. They would use the Force to fight as a collective, subsuming their individuality to a battle-meld so that they moved and reacted as one. We could not match them in this. We would not match them in this. We would not fight like insects. At Columus, Pina's armies cut off Xendor and his vanguard from the bulk of his forces, and Pina's Jedi Knights advanced on my love as one. Beside him stood the mightiest of our warriors—the likes of Sethul Asaiage and Tun Bohoi—but one by one they fell to the Jedi hive. Until finally Pina struck down my love, and his spirit fled into the Dark, rather than be drunk by the Green Blade and destroyed.

* * *

Then they came to Lettow to kill the rest of us. I knew there was no hope of victory, only of escape. And so we held Pina's armies off just long enough to seek refuge beyond the Republic's borders.

I fled into the tangled stars beyond Kitel Phard, following secret ways Xendor had discovered. But the Green Blade followed, and I was cornered on Irkalla. I had the Kashi Mer talisman bequeathed to me by Xendor, the symbol of his sundered royal house, and when Pina battered the blade out of my hand I drew upon this talisman's powers, making it a lens for my rage and sorrow, for my love for Xendor and my despair over what had been taken from us. I exploded Pina's blade, driving its shards through his body. He was ruined, and I laughed out loud to see it.

But as I told you, Awdrysta was a bloody-minded man. He had learned to use the Force to

bind and smother an opponent, to subdue one's life energies. Morichro, they called it. Even as his eyes grew dull, Pina did this to me. I felt my legs topple, my heart grow heavy and strain, my lungs flutter and struggle. I saw him die, but his spell could not be unmade. All went gray, and then black, and I knew no more.

Pina had not killed me, though many times I have wished he had. I do not know who constructed my tomb or set me within it. I awoke to your faces. I awoke to find that twenty-five thousand years had gone by—all I knew and all I loved curdled into history and then dismissed as myth. Not even dust remains of those who were dear to me. I have outlived planets, and the very constellations are scrambled and strange.

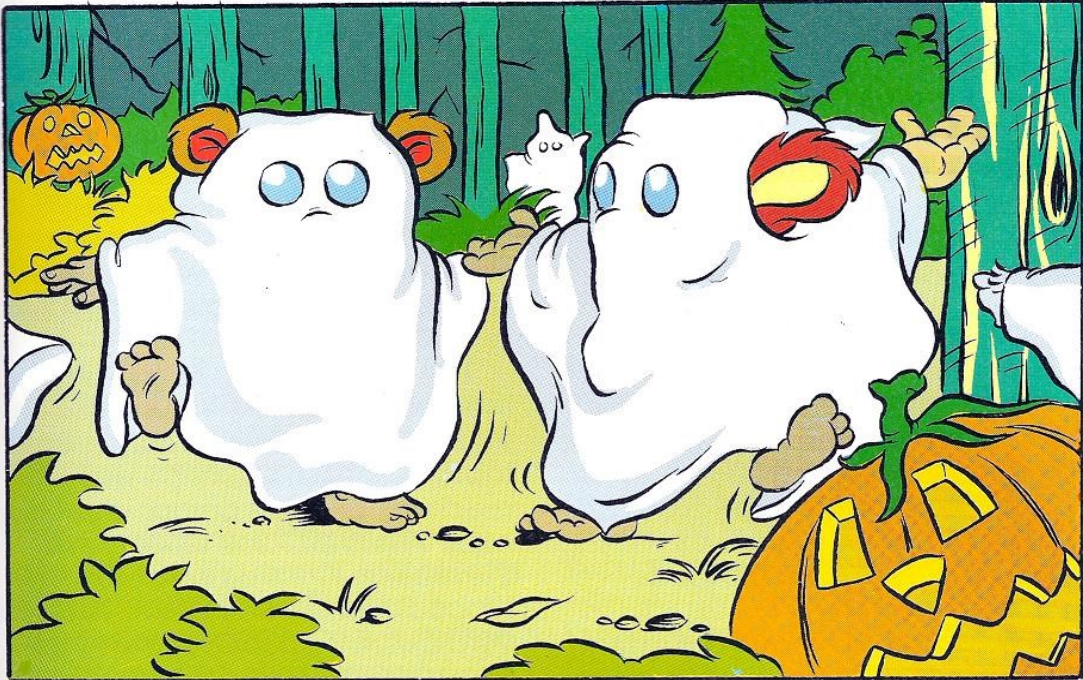
I am alone in a way none of you could possibly imagine.

* * *

Xendor told me he once journeyed to a dead world where the Force was worshipped as a triad of divine beings. The Daughter was the Light Side. The Son was the Dark Side. And the Father? The Father was the Force itself, perhaps. Xendor said he spoke with these beings, and I asked eagerly what he had discovered. He laughed at me, and dismissed the question.

"Even now, you refuse to understand," he told me. "There are as many truths to the Force as there are hearts within which the Force manifests itself. The existence of the triad has no more bearing on the reality of the Force than the Ashla and the Bogan, or anything I tell you, or anything you tell others. Any philosophy, creed, or religion that opens the heart to the Force proves itself to be true. My legions follow the dictates of such a creed. But that is only a demonstration of the application of power, Arden. It says nothing about the rightness of our beliefs, or the universality of our faith."

Chief Chirpa Kidnapped!



The whole of the woodland clearing rang with the sound of laughter. All the Ewoks had dressed up as ghosts and were having a wonderful time at their annual Hallowe'en party – one of the best events of their year.

"Arroo!"

"Whazzat?" gasped Wicket, almost jumping out of his costume as a spooky spectre reared up in front of him.

"It's only me," giggled Teebo. "This party is great fun, isn't it?"

"Y-yes?" said Wicket, but he was obviously not too sure.

Just then Princess Kneesaa danced across the clearing, giggling merrily. "Look at that," she laughed, pointing to a huge, red creature standing at the edge of the clearing. "Someone's dressed up as a Hanadak."

"I wonder who it is," said Teebo.

"Danger!" cried Wicket. "That's

no fancy-dress costume. That's a real Hanadak. Look at the fangs."

Suddenly the atmosphere changed as fear spread through the village. Wicket rallied the Ewoks behind him, cried "Charge!" and the brave Ewoks ran into the attack.

With one swipe of its enormous tail, the Hanadak sent the courageous Ewoks flying. "Come on," said Wicket picking himself up. "I've got an idea."

Teebo and Kneesaa followed him across the village to where the Hanadak now stood.

"Gather as many blue dlock leaves as you can carry," he said, pointing to a tall plant heavy with large leaves.

The three Ewoks soon stripped the plant bare and then Wicket led the others right up to the Hanadak.

"Now throw them over the

beast," he ordered, and in an instant the Hanadak was covered with the foliage. The air was filled with a heady aroma for the dlock plant leaves were the most fragrant and soothing of all the plants in the forest.

Before you could say "Dangar!" a wide grin spread across the Hanadak's ugly face and it lopped off into the forest. Wicket, Teebo and Kneesaa were also grinning widely as they went back to the other Ewoks who cheered them loudly.

"On with the party," giggled Kneesaa and soon the Ewoks were enjoying themselves hugely again.

While all this had been going on, Chief Chirpa had been in the harvest store getting the food ready for the party. He was so involved in what he was doing that he had not heard the sounds of the battle that had raged. Neither had he heard a Dulok sneak into the

harvest store.

The Dulok and his two companions outside had known about the Hallowe'en party and had decided that, with all the Ewoks busy enjoying themselves, it would be a good time to raid the harvest store.

It was very gloomy in the store and the Dulok didn't see Chief Chirpa who was busy at his task. Thinking that the coast was clear he beckoned his two accomplices inside.

The three tip-toed deep inside the gloomy store. It was so gloomy that they didn't see the ladder on top of which Chief Chirpa was reaching for some crunch-tree nuts. The first Dulok tripped over the ladder. The second Dulok tripped over the first Dulok. And the third Dulok tripped over the other two and sent the ladder wobbling wildly as he stumbled.

Chief Chirpa tried desperately to



keep his balance and grasped hold of the corner of a heavy sack on the top shelf. But it was no good! Woosh! he flew through the air taking the sack with him. There was a loud 'plop' as he landed in a wooden box. The sack fell on top of him, covering him completely.

The dazed Duloks picked themselves up. By now their eyes were accustomed to the gloom and they could see the sack of food sitting in the box. But, of course, they couldn't see Chief Chirpa underneath it.

"Look!" said one of the Duloks gleefully. "A box of food. Let's sneak it back to our camp for our supper."

By this time the Ewoks' party was in full swing again, and no one noticed as the three Duloks, staggering under the weight of the box, skirted the clearing and headed back to their camp.

"I wish Father would bring on the food," said Princess Kneesaa. "I'm starving."

"Let's go and find him," said Teebo.

Wicket, Teebo and the princess made their way to the harvest store and peered inside.

"Can't see a thing," said Kneesaa. "Bring me a lantern."

A few minutes later, Kneesaa was holding a lantern aloft and was peering round the harvest store.

"He's not here!" she said. "And look!" She pointed to the ladder and then down to the floor. "There's something odd. These are Duloks' footprints."

"They can't have kidnapped him, can they?" gasped Wicket in astonishment.

"What else could have happened to him?" asked Teebo.

"Let's follow the tracks," said Kneesaa.

Even as the three Ewoks were speaking, the Dulok trio had reached their camp. They placed the box in front of their chief.

"Open the sack!" he commanded.

The three Dulok raiders pulled the sack from the box and there, staring up at them was a furious Chief Chirpa.

"Take him!" roared the chief.

"Take him yourself," quivered a cowardly Dulok.

"Dolt!" said the chief, jumping on top of Chief Chirpa, pinning him inside the box. "Bring me some rope."

Chief Chirpa had almost pushed the Dulok chief from his chest by the time a huge length of rope was brought forward. But although he heaved and heaved, he was outnumbered and was soon tied up.

"Drag him to the tree and tie him to it."

A few minutes later Chief Chirpa was securely tied to a huge baccy tree. "Just wait!" roared Chirpa.





"When I'm free, I'll have you for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

The Duloks danced around their prisoner, laughing and jeering at him.

"We'll get a ransom. We'll get a ransom," they taunted him.

Chirpa roared and bellowed so loudly that even though he was tied to the tree, the Duloks fell back in fear.

"All this noise is giving me a headache!" said the Dulok chief. "Let's leave him and have something to eat."

The Duloks retreated to their tables and were soon tucking into a hearty meal. Still Chirpa roared and shouted.

"He'll give me indigestion," complained the Dulok chief. "Can't someone shut him up."

"Shut him up yourself!" said a Dulok.

"I'll shut you up," roared the chief, and soon all the Duloks were scrapping amongst themselves.

The sound of the fighting filled the forest. "Listen!" said Teebo, who, with his two friends, was still following the tracks.

"Duloks! We must be near their camp."

They followed the sounds and soon they were on the edge of the Duloks' camp. "There's Father," whispered Kneesaa. "Over there."

The Duloks were still fighting each other and didn't notice Wicket as he made his way stealthily to Chief Chirpa and cut him free.

"Aagghh!" With a mighty roar, Chief Chirpa charged into the fray,

knocking his enemies hither and thither until they were all scattered around the clearing, so dazed they were seeing stars.

"Back to our village," he said to the others, and led them through the forest to their homes.

The Ewoks were so delighted to see their chief again that, although it was very late, a great feast was prepared.

Meanwhile, back at the Duloks' camp, their chief and his men were a very sorry sight. They were bruised and bandaged.

"Thank goodness he's gone," said the chief. "I couldn't have taken much more of all that bellowing. What an old windbag. You men should count yourselves lucky at having me as your leader and not that bad-tempered old Chirpa."

"Yes," agreed a nearby Dulok. "You're much more of a pushover than he."

"Careful," said the chief. "Or else I might make a truce with the Ewoks and ask Chirpa to be our leader, too."

"You wouldn't!" gasped the Duloks in one voice. "That would be . . ."

"Unthinkable?" suggested the chief.

"Yes!" they chorused.

"In that case, we'll have no more in . . . subordiwhat's-it-called," he continued.

". . . ination," said the only Dulok with more than a hundredth of a brain.

"Bless you!" said the chief.

"You'd better go and see the shaman and get something for that cold."



Return of the Great One!

Wicket lay beside his friend on the soft grass of the forest. He yawned and said, "There's nothing like the peace and quiet of the forest in the Sun Season, eh, Teebo?"

Teebo stood up. "Except it's too hot. Come on! I'll race you to the dam. We can cool off there."

The two Ewoks sped through the forest towards the dam which was high above the village.

"Cudvarrk!" gasped Wicket, stopping to get his breath back. "Slow down!"

"Dangar!" cried Teebo, stopping suddenly, for the hard ground of the forest had suddenly become completely water-logged. There was squelchy mud where there should have been sun-baked soil.

Before Wicket could say anything there was a loud crashing sound and the air was filled with the sound of running water.

"It's the dam!" cried Wicket.

"The Duloks must have breached it. They're trying to flood us out."

"We must get back to the village as quickly as possible," gasped Teebo. "We must warn Chief Chirpa." As he spoke he ran towards a Snarlif horse that was grazing nearby. "Come on, Wicket. We'll ride this beauty back."

The two Ewoks jumped on to the horse's back and galloped towards the village.

As soon as he heard what had happened, Chief Chirpa summoned Chukha-Trok, the woodsman.

"We need to build a breakwater immediately," he told the burly Ewok. "The dam's been sabotaged."

"Leave it to me," said Chukha-Trok. A few moments later there came the sound of two mighty blows of the woodsman's axe followed by a loud crashing as



Chukha-Trok felled a gigantic tree.

Not a moment too soon, it landed just in front of the gushing waters that were threatening to deluge the village.

"Veek!" gasped Teebo in relief, as the waters ran round the tree and cascaded over a cliff to create a spectacular waterfall. "Now we have time to repair the dam."

The Ewoks had lived in the forest for hundreds of years and thought that they knew everything that there was to know about it . . . but what they didn't know was that deep beneath the forest floor there was a vast, dark cavern. For thousands of years nothing had penetrated the eerie silence, but on the day the dam broke a drop of water seeped deep down through the earth and landed with a loud "plop" which echoed through the cavern. Then another . . . then another.

Suddenly another sound shuddered through the cavern. There was a loud very loud

'Urrrrgggghhhhh!'; so loud was it that the cavern walls began to shake: so loud was it that far above in the forest the Ewoks trembled with fear.

"What's that?" gasped Teebo as the ground shook so violently that he had to hold on to a tree to stay on his feet.

"Kffllnnnch!" It was as if the forest had been hit by an earthquake as trees tumbled and debris was scattered all around. A huge hole appeared in the ground and the Ewoks stared in disbelief as a monstrous head appeared from it. Steam poured from the creature's awesome nostrils. Its mouth opened wide and the Ewoks were terrified by the dreadful fangs that lashed out. Each fang was as big as a fully-grown Ewok!

Chief Chirpa gasped. "I-i-i-i-t's a k-k-k-k-radak," he stammered. "One of the g-g-g-reat ones. They've been extinct for thousands of years."

Teebo hugged Wicket for comfort as the huge monster





heaved itself from the ground. With each swing of its terrible neck, a forest tree crashed to the ground.

"If it breaks our support tree, we are doomed!" cried Chief Chirpa. "Logray!" he shouted. "Do something."

Logray, the Ewoks' wise old sage, came running out of his hut. As he ran towards the chief, a branch fell from a tree and knocked him senseless. Princess Kneesaa rushed to the old Ewok's side and knelt over him. When she realized that he wasn't seriously hurt she darted into his hut. Teebo and Wicket ran after her and found her mixing a potion from the herbs and waters that Logray stored there.

"What are you doing?" asked Wicket.

"I have often watched Logray mix his potions," replied the princess. "I think I know how to deal with the monster."

Teebo looked out of the hut. The monster had now pulled itself right out of the hole in the ground and was so tall that Teebo had to crane his neck skywards to see its head.

Great jets of fire spouted from its nostrils. All around, brave Ewoks were hitting and kicking it, but the monster didn't even notice them.

"Hurry, Kneesaa!" Teebo shouted.

"Finished!" cried Princess Kneesaa, running out of the hut, clasping a large bowl of steaming green liquid. "This should calm the monster down."

In her haste, the princess didn't notice a bundle of twigs. "Oh no!" she wept as the bowl slipped from her hands, sending its contents splashing over all the Ewoks on the ground below.

One by one, the Ewoks dropped to the ground and lay motionless where they fell.

"Kneesaa, you chook," said Wicket. "You've mixed a sleeping potion. Everyone's unconscious apart from you, me and Teebo . . ."

"And the monster!" exclaimed Teebo.

A loud roar from the ferocious beast shook the leaves from the trees, covering the three friends with foliage.

"Let's get out of here," gasped Teebo.

"Don't be such a drongo," barked Wicket. "If we don't do something, our village will be destroyed."

Meanwhile Kneesaa had rushed back to Logray's hut and was busy mixing another potion. "Keep the monster busy," she shouted.

"Keep it busy?" groaned Teebo. "What does she want us to do? Play Monopoly with it?"

Just then, Princess Kneesaa came running from the hut carrying another bowl. This time the liquid inside it was yellow. "I think this should be strong enough to send the kradak to sleep . . ." and as she spoke she slipped on a damp leaf and slithered along the branch. The bowl fell from her grip and its contents poured right down the monster's back.

It let out an angry roar as the scalding liquid burned into its flesh.

"Look!" cried the princess, pointing at the kradak.

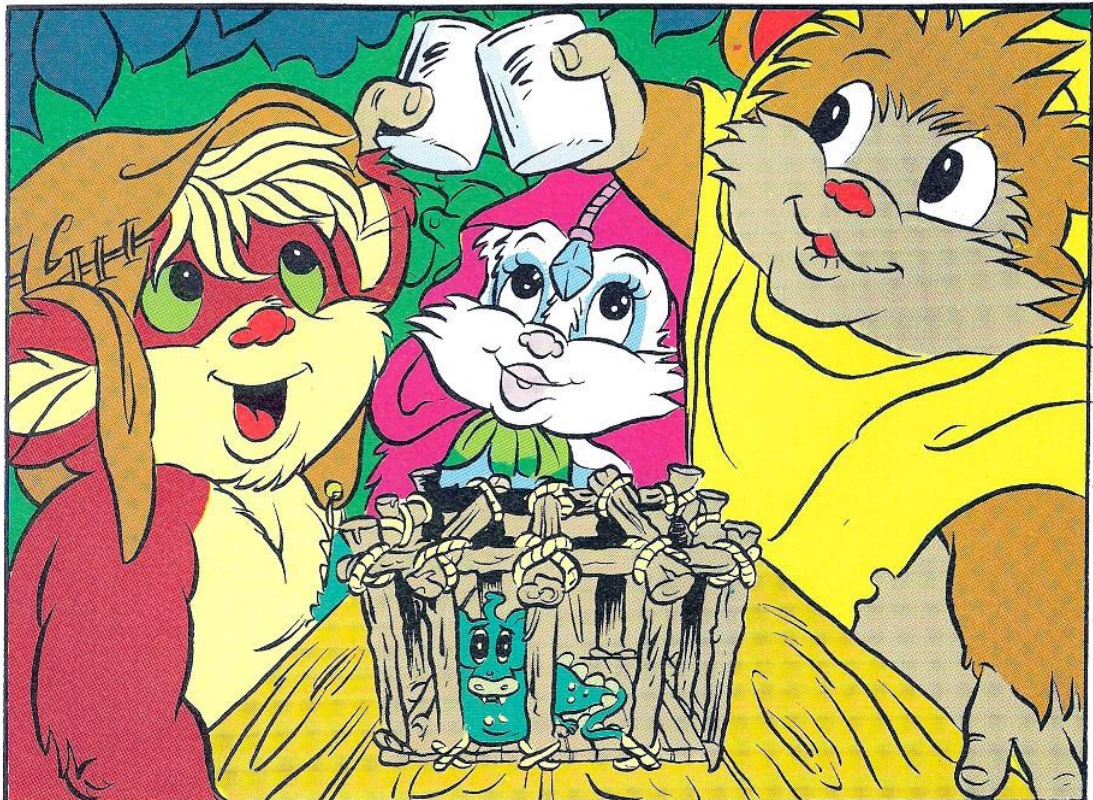
The three Ewoks watched in astonishment as the creature started to shrink. It got smaller . . . and smaller . . . and smaller, until it was no bigger than an Ewok's hand.

"Kneesaa, you're wonderful," cheered Wicket. "You mixed a shrinking potion, not a sleeping one. We're saved."

By the time the other Ewoks had come to their senses, Wicket and the princess had built a tiny cage for the little monster which was looking very sorry for itself.

"You know, Teebo," said Wicket. "If we diverted some of the water from the breakwater to the hole before we repaired the dam, we could make a super swimming pool."

"What a great idea," agreed Teebo. "But let's do it tomorrow. I've had enough for one day."



The Ice Princess!



The Season of Snow had come around again on Endor. Usually the forest rang with the laughter of the Ewoks as they played in the snow, but not this year. The Ewoks were in mourning.

When the first snows had come, Princess Kneesaa, Wicket and Teebo had been making a slide when the princess had tumbled over and had been bitten by an ice-beetle.

Wicket was broken-hearted and stood sobbing as he and Teebo looked at the beautiful princess, encased in a tomb of ice crystals. Chief Chirpa knelt by his daughter's side, his hands covering his swollen eyes.

"Is there nothing we can do?" asked Teebo.

"I don't know," said Wicket.

"Master Logray is going through all his parchments. Maybe he will come up with something."

Just then the old sage approached the three mourners. "Have you found an answer?" wept Chief Chirpa.

"There is a way," said Logray. "But it is fraught with danger. The ice-beetle's poison can only be combated by the juice of the fire plant . . ."

"But that is only found on the Mountain of Doom," wailed Chief Chirpa.

The Mountain of Doom was the home of the Frost Giants. None of the Ewoks who had set out to journey there had ever been seen again.

"Even if there was a way, I can't spare my men," said the chief. "The Duloks are hungry. They were too lazy to harvest their crops this year and already they have begun to attack our store-houses. I need all my men to fend them off."

"You must spare Teebo and

me," said Wicket bravely. "We shall go to the mountain."

"Shall we?" squeaked Teebo. "How?"

"By glider!" said Wicket bravely. "And we shall succeed."

A few days later, after an uneventful flight, Wicket and Teebo landed their glider at the base of the Mountain of Doom. It was much too high for them to contemplate flying to the top, so with ice-clamps attached to their feet to give them some grip on the smooth mountain face, they set off to scale the peak.

"Wicket," said Teebo as they struggled up the steep slope.

"What's big, red, flies and eats Ewoks for dinner?"

"This is no time for jokes," snapped Wicket.

"Who's joking?" gulped Teebo, pointing to a deadly, red dragon-bird that was swooping towards them.

With a blood-curdling squawk the dragon-bird zoomed towards the two Ewoks. Teebo clutched the mountain-face for safety but the dragon-bird's wings clipped his back and knocked him off his balance.

"Yeeeeooow!" his cry filled the air as he plunged down towards the jagged rocks far below.

A few feet further down the mountain, Wicket watched in horror as his friend fell towards him. Clinging precariously to a tufty plant with one hand, he somehow managed to grab hold of Teebo's leg as he flashed by. The force almost pulled Wicket off the mountain, but he held on with grim determination as Teebo scrambled for safety.

"This makes a change," giggled Wicket nervously. "It's usually you who pulls my leg!"

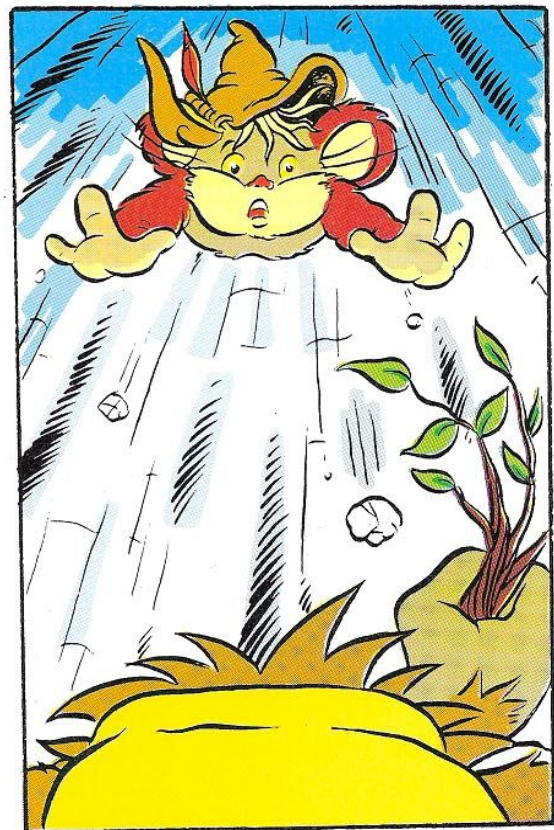
Teebo was much too shocked to think of something funny to say, and the two continued climbing in silence until they reached a ledge.

With a great whoosh of wings, the dragon-bird swooped in again. Just in time, Wicket spotted a cranny in the rock-face and he and Teebo pressed themselves into it. Imagine their surprise when they found that the cranny was, in fact, the entrance to a cave.

"Come on," said Wicket. "I'd rather face whatever's in there, than stand up to the dragon-bird."

A few minutes later, Teebo's voice echoed through a maze of tunnels. "At least if we'd stayed out there, we'd have been killed quickly. Now we're lost and will probably starve to death slowly and miserably!"

"We may as well press on," said Wicket.



It seemed to Teebo that they had been in the tunnels for hours before they turned a dark corner and stopped in amazement. For there in front of them, was an enormous cave lit by hundreds of shining crystals. At one end there was a table laden with delicious-looking food.

"At least we won't starve to death," said Teebo, scurrying towards the table.

"Come back, Teebo!" ordered Wicket. "We don't have any time to eat. We must find the fire plant and we won't find it here. That's for sure!"

"How do you know?" asked Teebo.

"Because I think this must be the throne-room of the Frost Giants' king, and Frost Giants are obviously unlikely to have the fire plant."

"Why?"

"It would melt them, silly."

"No need to be quite so hot-tempered," snapped Teebo. "All right. Let's go."

But it was too late, for as Teebo spoke a procession of Frost Giants entered the cavern, heralding the arrival of the king.

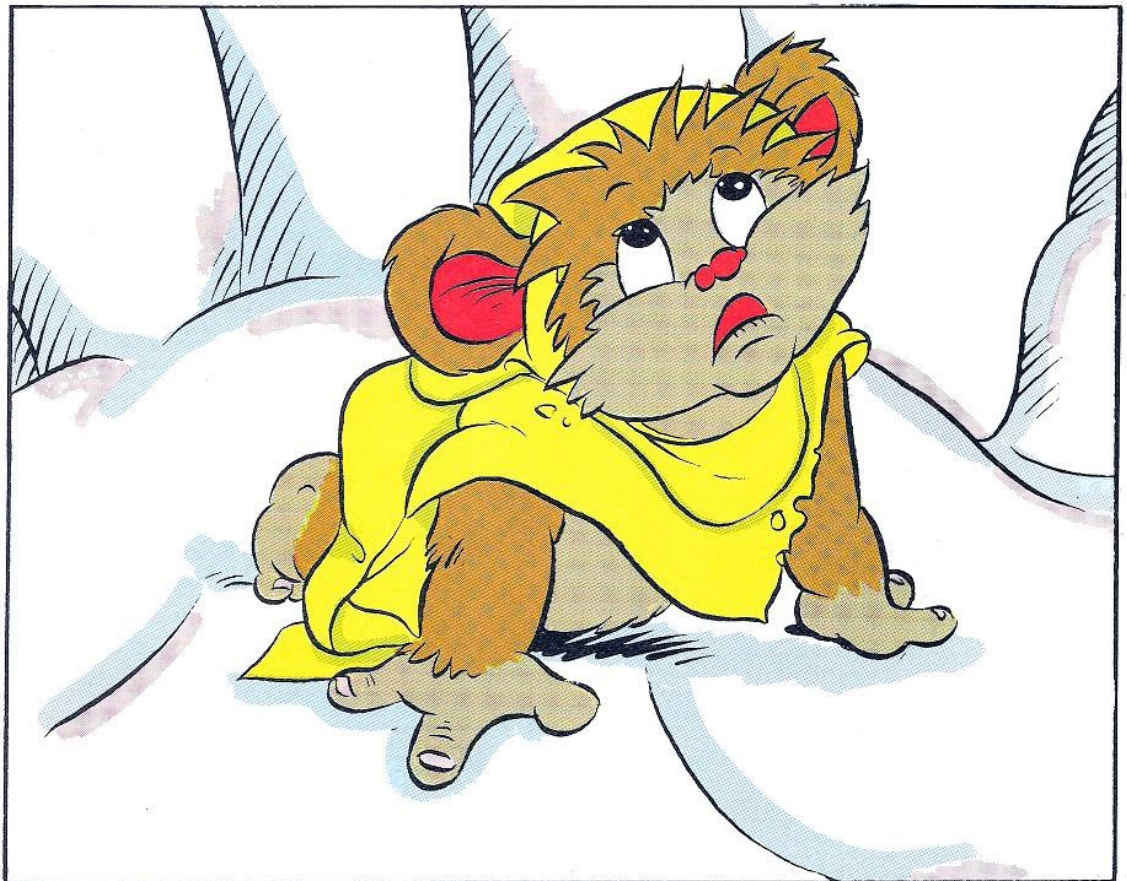
The Ewoks gulped at what they saw, for the Frost Giants were indeed gigantic, at least eight times the size of an Ewok.

"Run," cried Wicket. But before they could move Wicket and Teebo were surrounded by a circle of Frost Giants.

"Trespassers!" roared the king.

"Your Majesty," gulped Wicket, bowing low. "We did not intend to trespass. We were trying to . . ."

But before Wicket could finish, the Frost Giant king scooped him up in his icy hand.





"You are doomed," he said. "We have a special way of dealing with uninvited guests. We breathe on them."

"Oh well," said Teebo. "As long as you haven't had too much garlic, it can't be all that bad."

But Wicket had heard the legend of the Frost Giants' breath. Anyone who was touched by it was instantly turned into a block of ice.

Just as it seemed the Ewoks were doomed, two guards rushed into the throne-room. "Sire," gasped one. "The devil-bird has returned. We are being attacked!"

Wicket realized that the guard was talking about the dragon-bird, and he could see that the Frost Giants were terrified: with good reason, for one puff of the dragon-bird's breath and the giants would melt.

"Sire," said Wicket. "Teebo and I will deal with it. I have a plan."

Wicket quickly put his plan into action. He ordered the giants to build a huge wall of ice on the very edge of the mountain summit. Then he asked one of them to lead him back to the entrance to the maze, which was just below the summit. He could see the fearsome bird flying nearby.

Wicket made a very rude noise at the dragon-bird which swooped down towards him. Just as it looked as if the bird would have the courageous Ewok in its grasp, Wicket shouted "Now!" and darted backwards into the tunnel. Above, on the summit, the Frost Giants pushed with all their might against the towering wall, and before you could say, "Ewok!" it cascaded down the mountain in an enormous avalanche and smashed into the ledge.

The dragon-bird squawked as it was buried beneath tons of ice, and then was heard no more.

Teebo looked down and started to sob, for he thought that his friend had died along with the dragon-bird.

"Gone!" he sobbed. "Wicket's gone!"

"Well, I think that was very successful," said a voice behind the weeping Ewok. He spun round and there, standing quite calmly, was Wicket, looking for all the world as though nothing had happened.

"How . . ." started Teebo.

"I'll explain later," said Wicket.

"Ewoks," said the Frost Giant king. "You have saved us. How can we reward you?"

"If it please Your Majesty," said Wicket. "All we want is to be shown where the fire plant grows . . ."

"We will show you, but we dare not go near it," said the king. . .

When Wicket and Teebo returned to the village with the fire plant, Logray immediately consulted his parchments and

began to mix a steaming potion. When it was bubbling furiously he poured it over Kneesaa's icy form.

All the Ewoks watched impatiently and then there was a huge sigh of relief as the ice began to melt. Soon she was free of her frozen prison and a great cheer rang out through the forest.

Chief Chirpa was so grateful that he could hardly speak. But eventually he got his tongue back and thanked his two faithful Ewoks time and time again.

"It was nothing," said Wicket modestly.

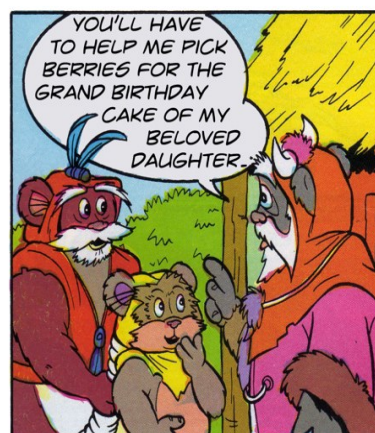
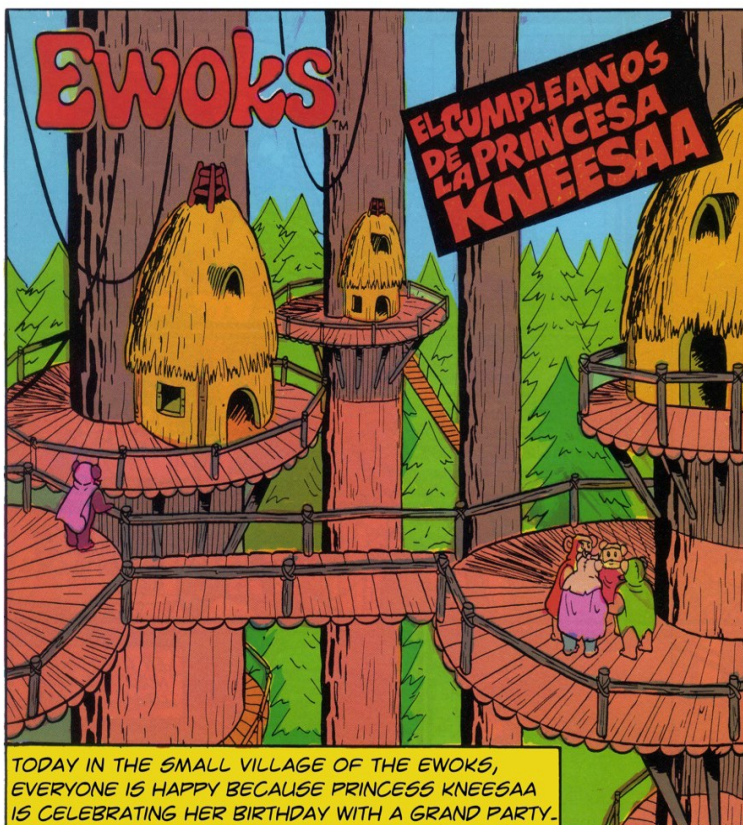
"Any time," said Teebo bravely.

"Let's go and play in the snow," said Princess Kneesaa smilingly.

A few minutes later the Ewoks were having the time of their lives as they zoomed down the snowy slopes on their sledges – apart from Wicket and Teebo. They'd had enough of snow and ice for one season!



EWOKS IN PRINCESS KNEESAA'S BIRTHDAY



Ewoks • MyComyc (1986)

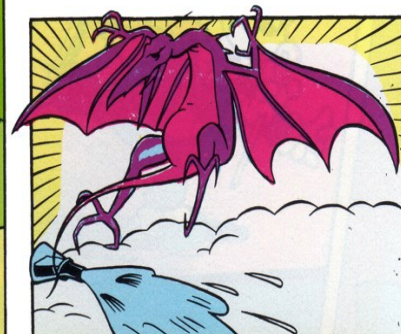
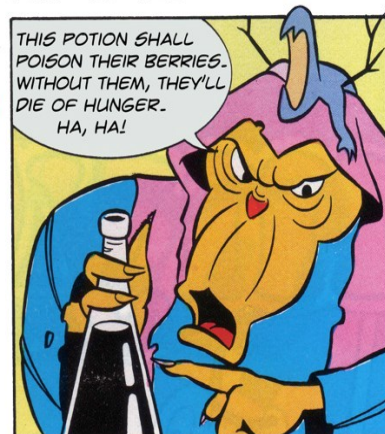
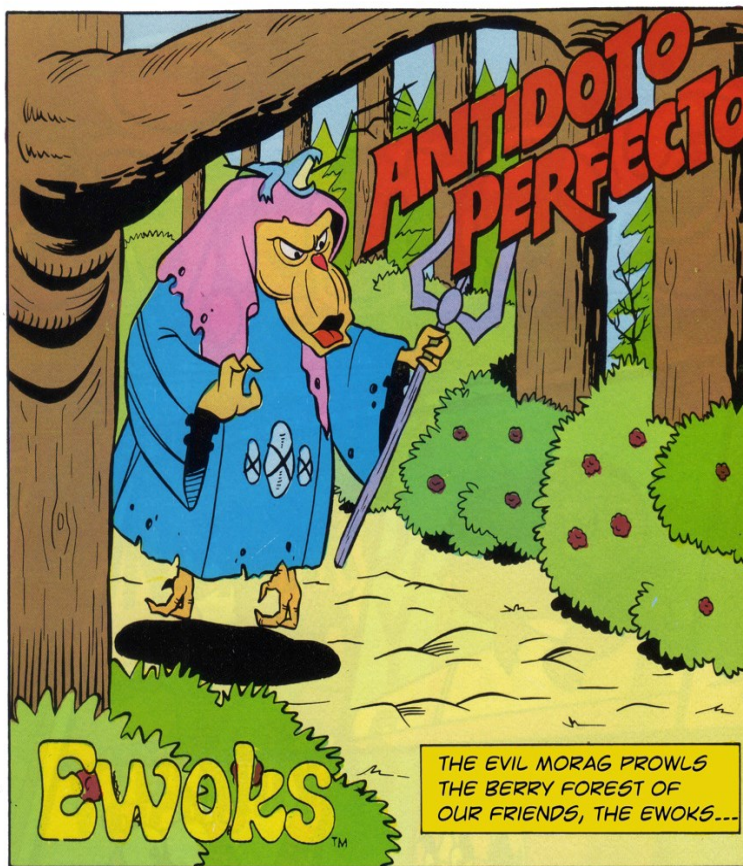
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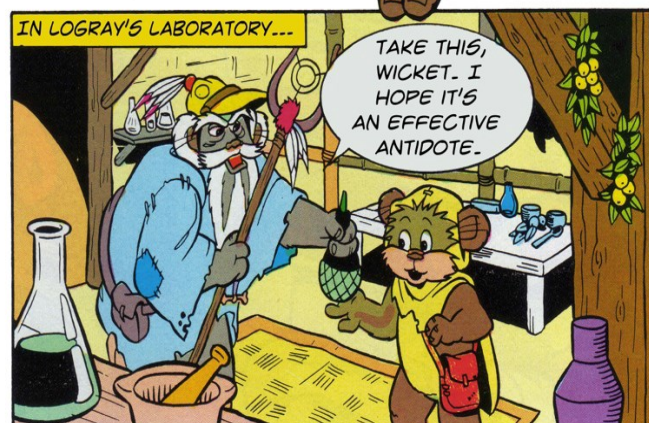


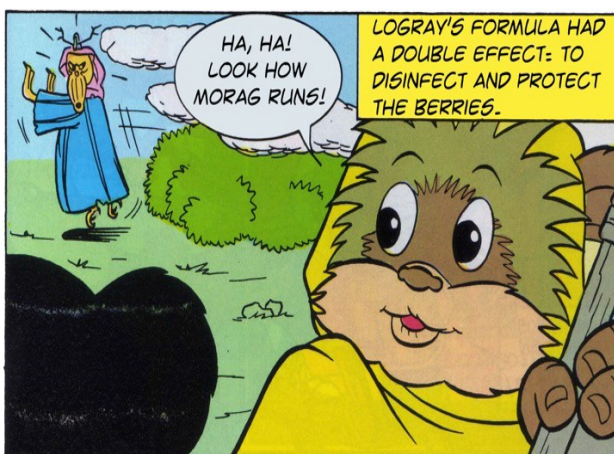
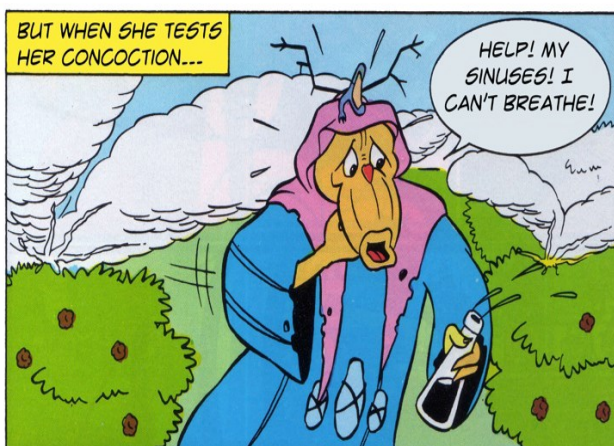
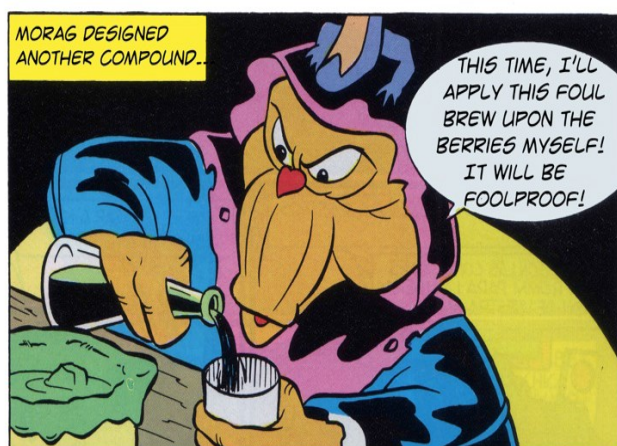
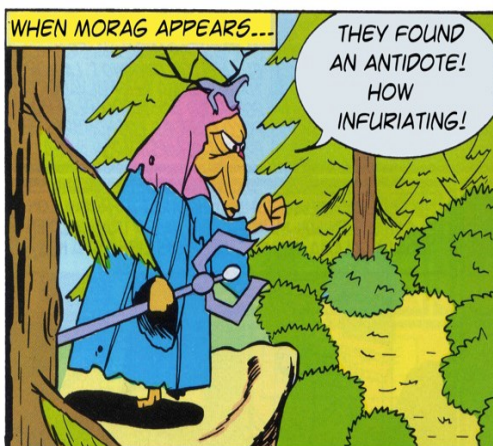
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EWOKS IN PERFECT ANTIDOTE



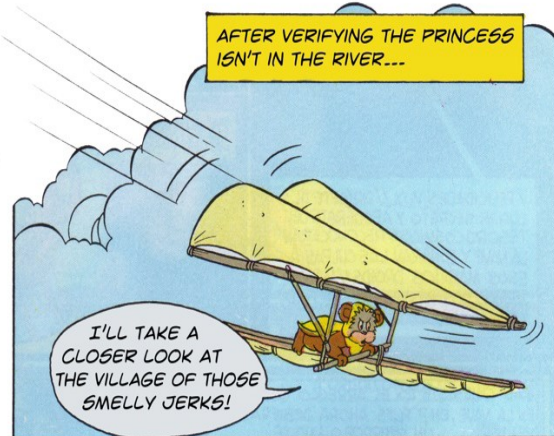
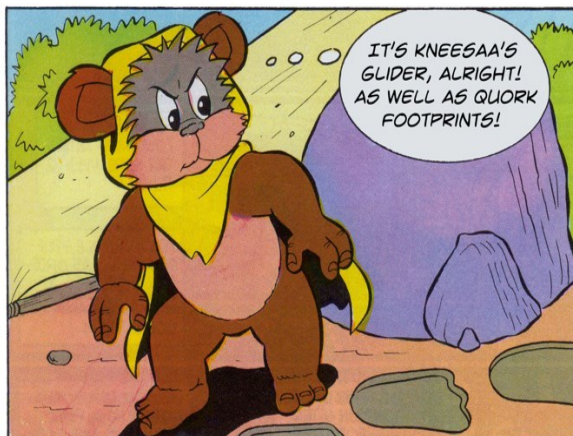
LATER THE MANTIGRUE, COMMANDED BY MORAG, DISPERSES THE POTION THROUGHOUT THE FOREST.

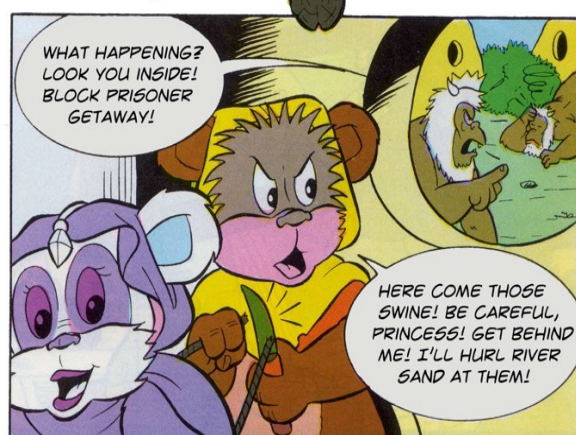




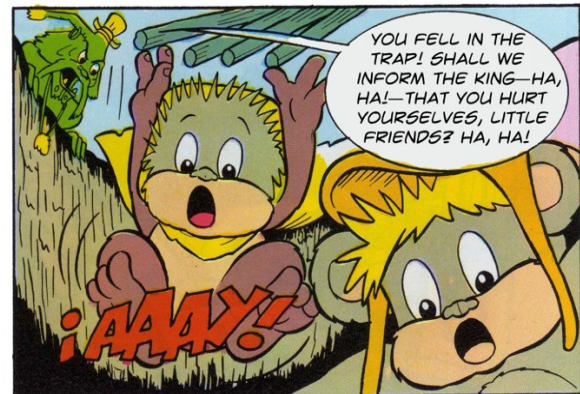
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EWOKS IN THE PRINCESS IN A PREDICAMENT





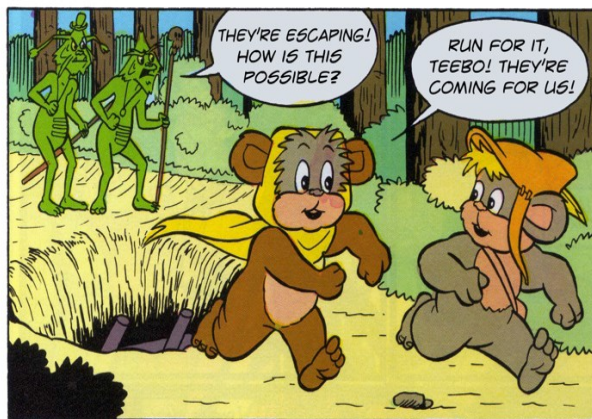
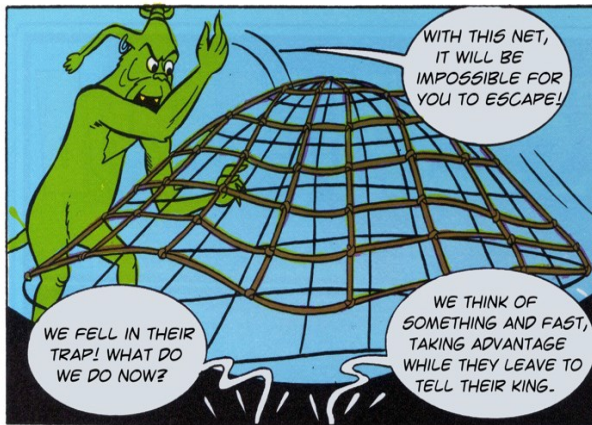
EWOKS IN SNARE IN THE FOREST



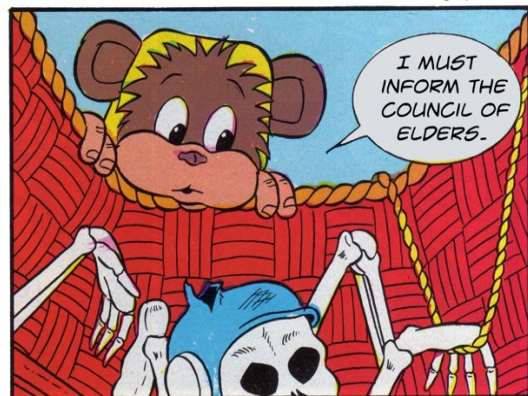
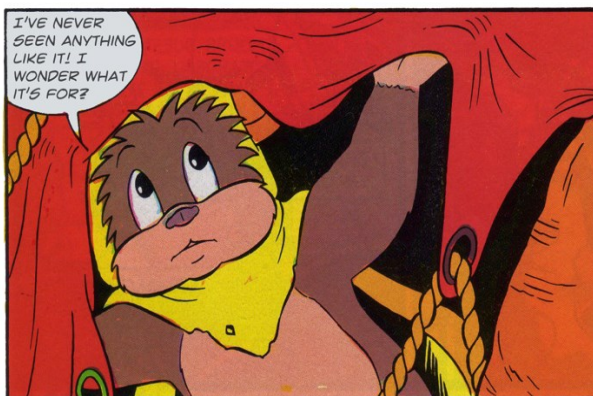
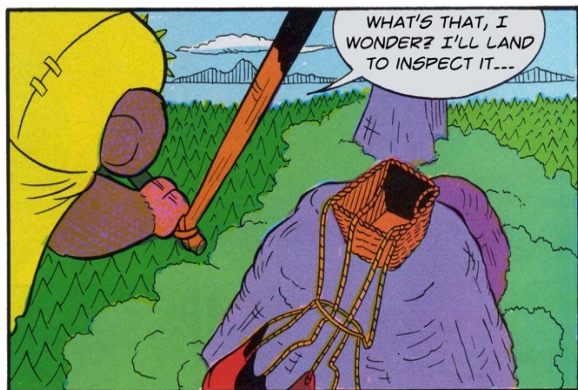
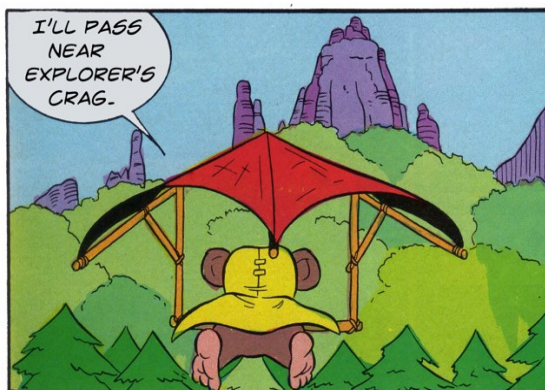
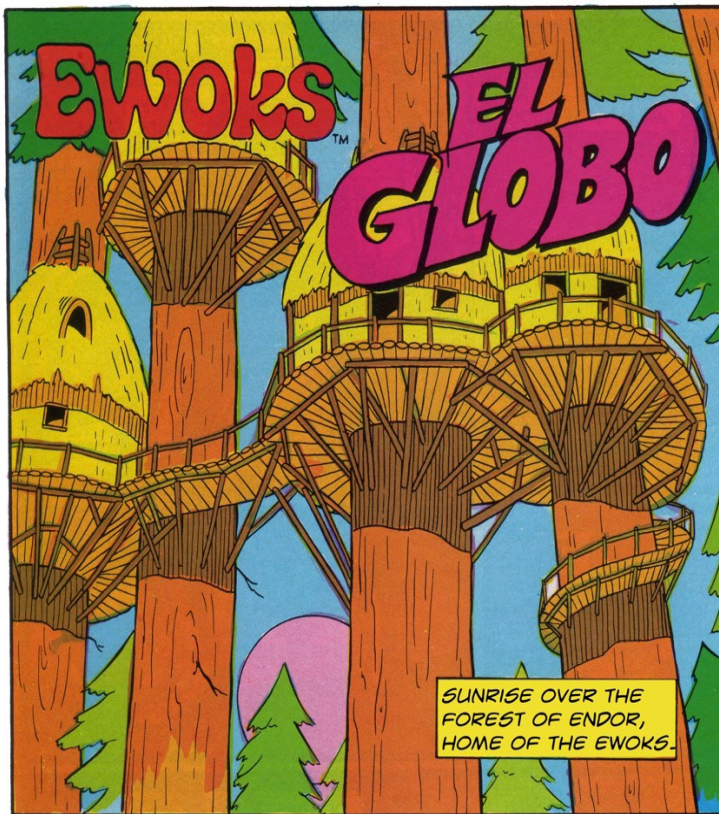
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EWOKS IN THE BALLOON

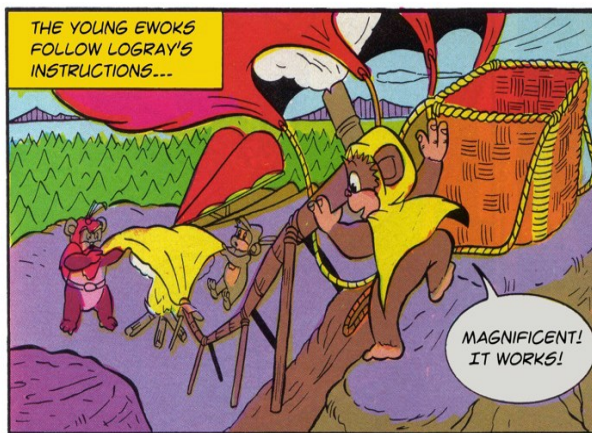
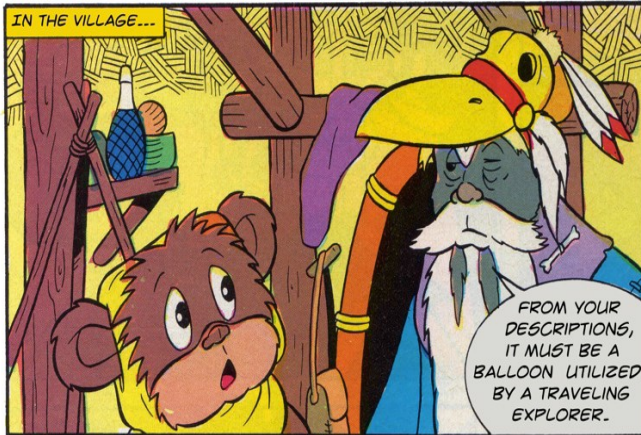


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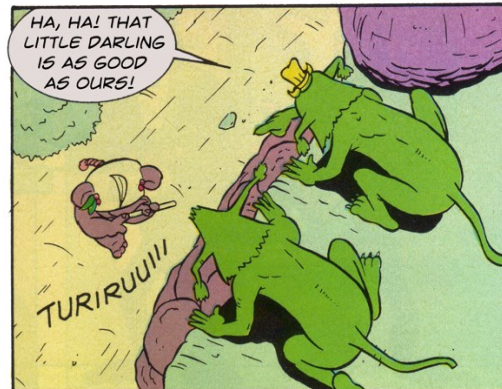
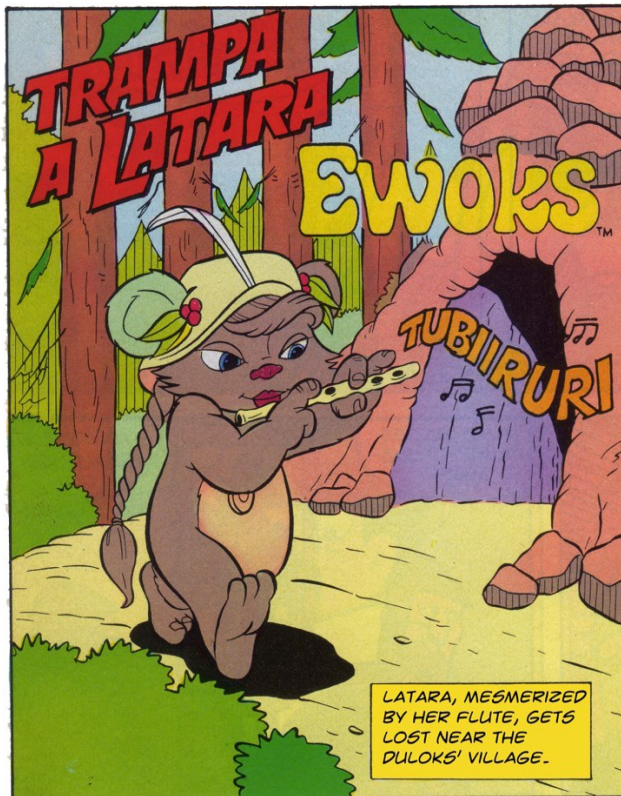
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EWOKS IN TO TRAP LATARA

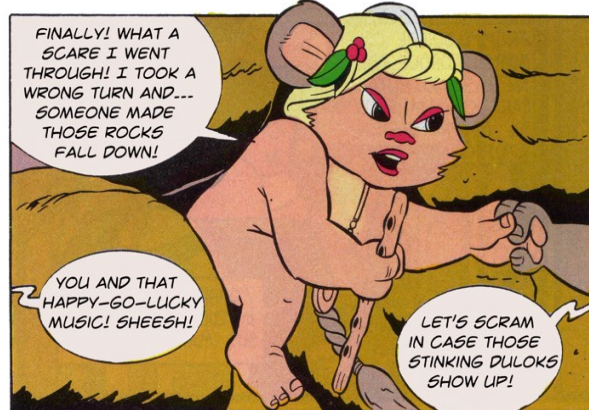
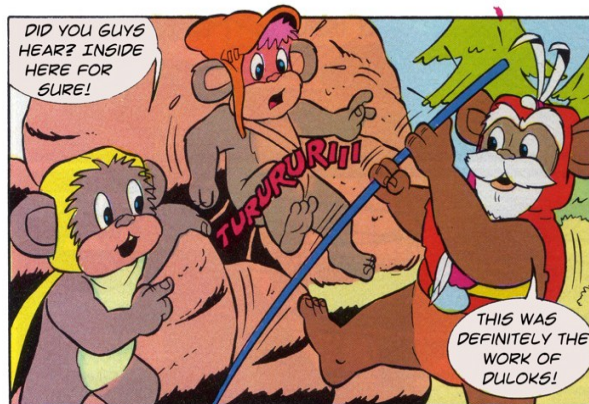
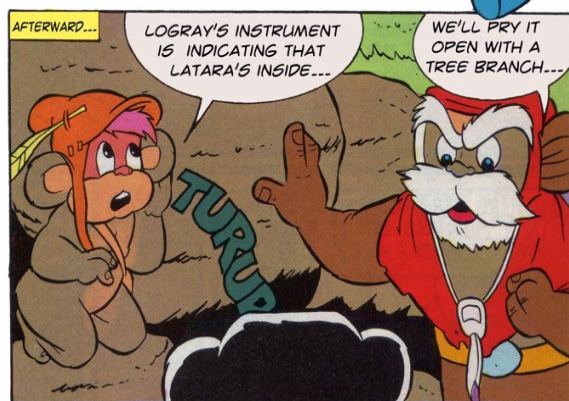
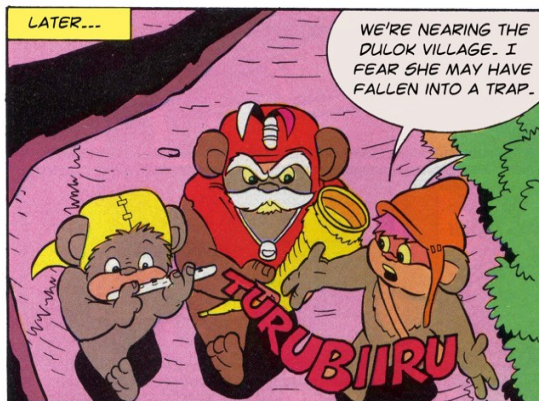
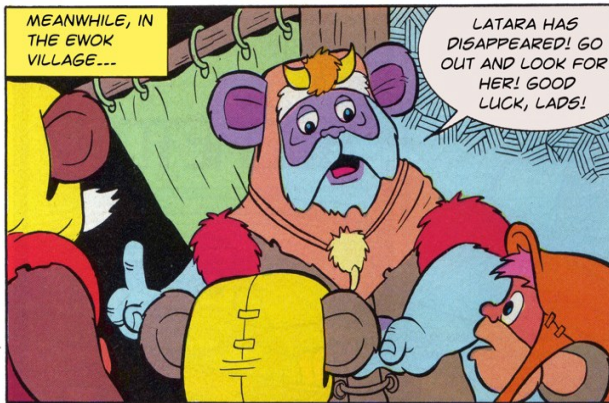


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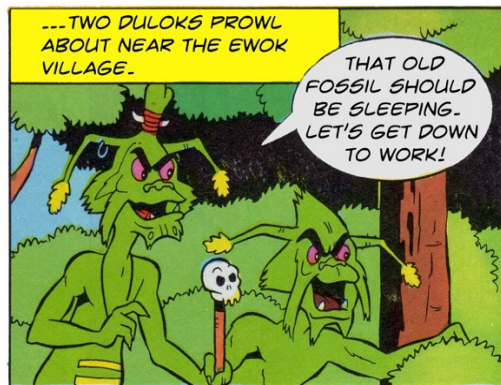
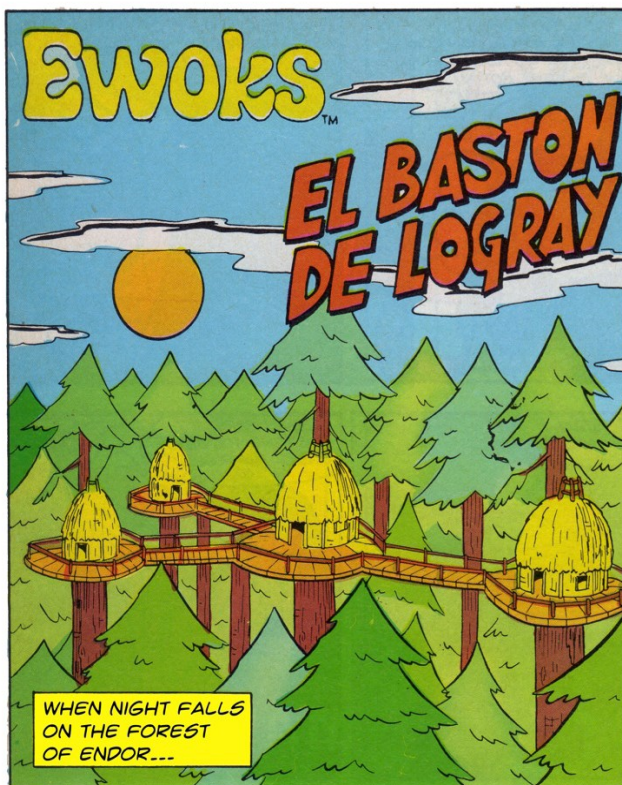
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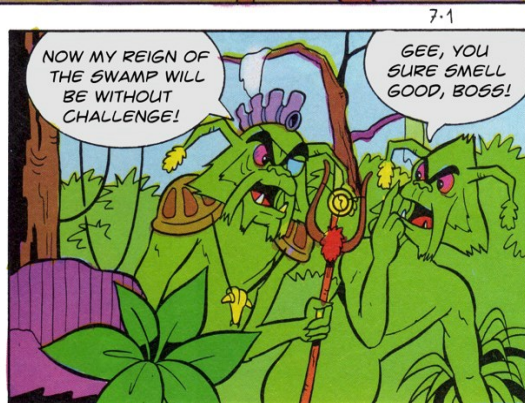
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EWOKS IN LOGRAY'S STAFF



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GRRAA!

BE GONE
WITH YOU,
LURDO!



OHH! THE
MAGIC WORKS!

WELL, WHAT DID
YOU EXPECT,
IMBECILE.



MEANWHILE, IN THE HOME
OF THE EWOKS...

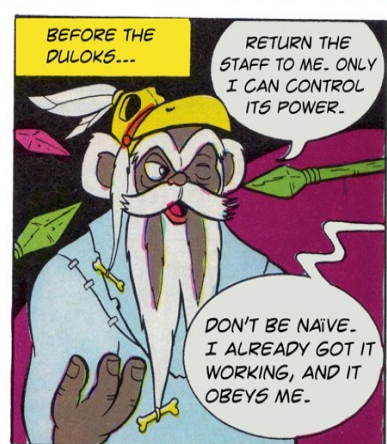
I SEE A
VISION OF
THE MAGIC
STAFF IN THE HANDS OF THE DULOK
CHIEFTAIN. WE MUST RECOVER
IT BEFORE...

...HE USES IT TO CAUSE
SOME MISCHIEF.



THEN...

LET'S HOPE THEIR
KING DOES THE
RIGHT THING AND
RETURNS IT TO US
WILLINGLY.
IF NOT...



BEFORE THE
DULOKS...

RETURN THE
STAFF TO ME. ONLY
I CAN CONTROL
ITS POWER.

DON'T BE NAÏVE.
I ALREADY GOT IT
WORKING, AND IT
OBEYS ME.



I CAN GIVE IT
ORDERS WITH A
MERE LOOK...

IS THAT
RIGHT? HA, HA!
WELL... IF YOU'RE
SO CLEVER,
PROVE IT!



OWWWW!

HA, HA!
I WARNED
YOU!



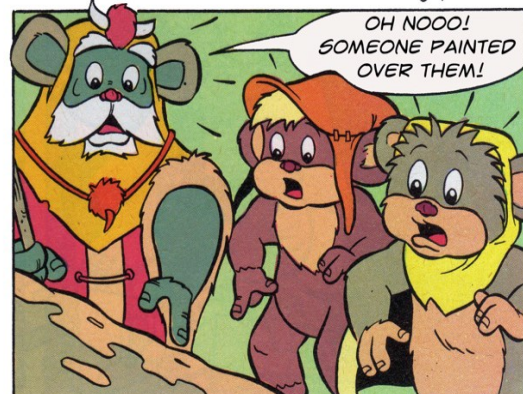
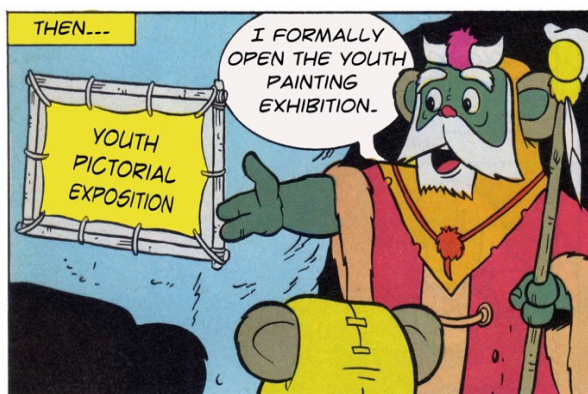
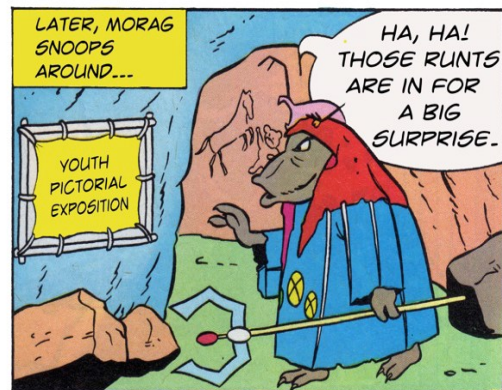
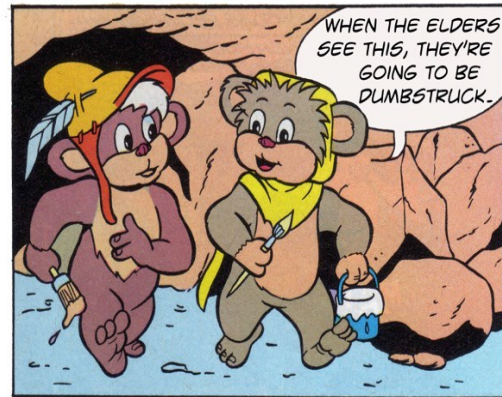
OW! OW! FINE...
TAKE THE STAFF,
AND GET
OUTTA HERE!

CERTAINLY, MY FINE
FRIEND. AND I HOPE
YOU LEARN NOT TO FOOL
WITH THINGS THAT DON'T
BELONG TO YOU!
HA, HA!

HA, HA!

FIN

EWOKS IN PAINTING EXPOSITION

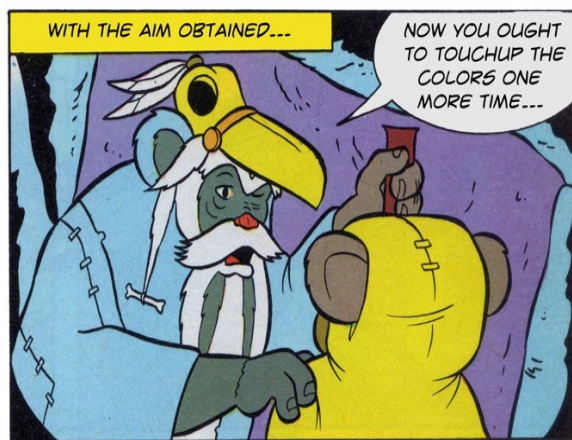
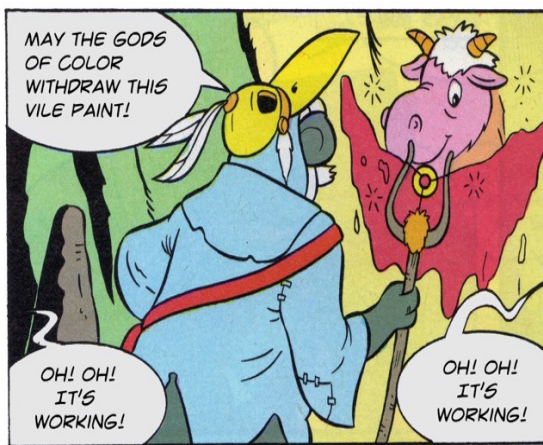


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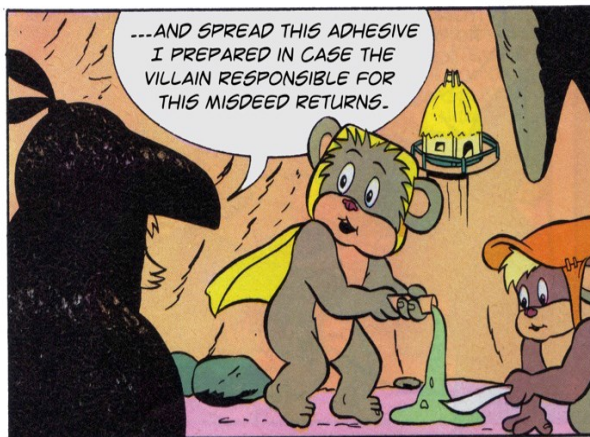
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82




STAR WARS DROIDS: THE ADVENTURES OF R2-D2 AND C-3PO
IN NEUTRALIZING TRIGON I



STAR WARS DROIDS
LAS AVENTURAS DE R2-D2 Y C-3PO

EN ANULANDO A TRIGON I

SATELLITE TRIGON I, A SOPHISTICATED MACHINE WHICH HAS BEEN EQUIPPED WITH THE DEADLIEST WEAPONS, HAS BEEN HIDDEN BY ORDER OF TIG FROMM, ITS WICKED CREATOR, IN THE DESERT MOUNTAINS.




AT LAST, I'VE PICKED UP FROMM'S EMISSION FREQUENCY!




FATHER, THE TRIGON I IS PREPARING TO INITIATE THE CONQUEST OF THE UNIVERSE. WE WILL RULE EVERYTHING! IT'S TUCKED AWAY IN THE IDEAL PLACE, AMONG THE DESERT CLIFFS.




I HOPE THIS TIME YOU DON'T PROVE YOURSELF USELESS. BEGIN AT ONCE: I'VE WANTED THIS FOR A LONG TIME.



WE HAVE TO PREVENT THEM FROM USING TRIGON I! WE NEED TO DESTROY IT!



I BELIEVE IT WILL BE A DIFFICULT MISSION. DO YOU HAVE A GOOD PLAN, MASTER THALL?



WE'LL THINK OF SOMETHING. LET'S HURRY!

IT WOULD BE GOOD FOR R2-D2 TO PROGRAM HIS CIRCUITS TO PROPOSE SOMETHING USEFUL. DON'T YOU AGREE?

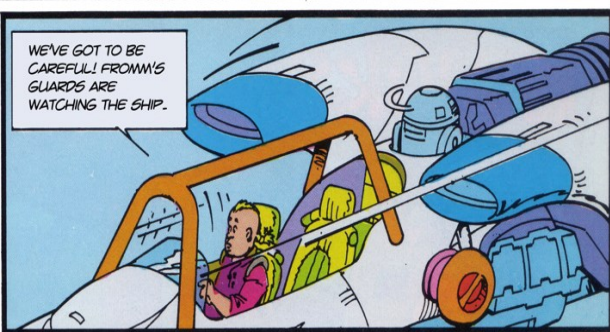
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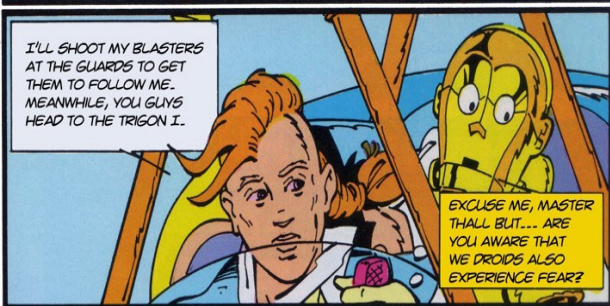


A FEW HOURS
LATER...

THERE
IT IS!

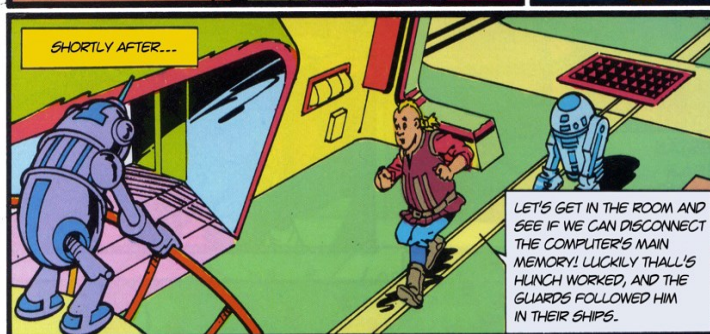


WE'VE GOT TO BE
CAREFUL! FROMM'S
GUARDS ARE
WATCHING THE SHIP.



I'LL SHOOT MY BLASTERS
AT THE GUARDS TO GET
THEM TO FOLLOW ME.
MEANWHILE, YOU GUYS
HEAD TO THE TRIGON I.

EXCUSE ME, MASTER
THALL BUT... ARE
YOU AWARE THAT
WE DROIDS ALSO
EXPERIENCE FEAR?

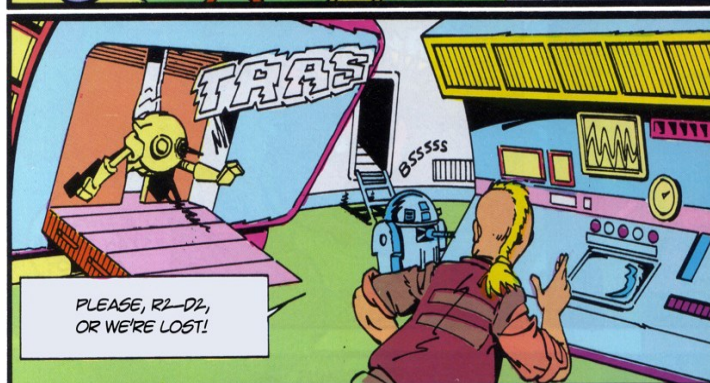


SHORTLY AFTER...

LET'S GET IN THE ROOM AND
SEE IF WE CAN DISCONNECT
THE COMPUTER'S MAIN
MEMORY! LUCKILY THALL'S
HUNCH WORKED, AND THE
GUARDS FOLLOWED HIM
IN THEIR SHIPS.



ELSEWHERE, OUR
FRIENDS ARE
CELEBRATING...



PLEASE, R2-D2,
OR WE'RE LOST!



LUCKILY EVERYTHING
TURNED OUT ALRIGHT,
AND THEY DIDN'T
CATCH US.



THANK YOU, MY FRIEND!
YOU'RE FANTASTIC! WITHOUT
ITS CENTRAL MEMORY, THIS
MACHINE IS WORTHLESS!



WHEN THEY REALIZE
WHAT'S HAPPENED...

YOU'RE A PERFECT IDIOT! I DON'T
KNOW WHAT I DID TO DESERVE
A SON LIKE YOU.



I AM PROUD
OF YOU, R2-D2.

FIN

STAR WARS DROIDS: THE ADVENTURES OF R2-D2 AND C-3PO IN KEA KIDNAPPED

STAR WARS DROIDS
LAS AVENTURAS DE R2-D2 Y C-3PO

EN SECUESTRO DE KEA

YOUNG FRIENDS THALL AND JORD, AIDED BY R2-D2 AND C-3PO, MANAGED TO MAKE OFF WITH THE TRIGON I SATELLITE, DEADLY WEAPON OF THE WICKED AND POWERFUL SISE FROMM. BUT SOON AFTER, FROMM'S MEN KIDNAPPED KEA...

MEANWHILE, AT OUR FRIENDS' HEADQUARTERS...

THESE ARE MR. FROMM'S CONDITIONS FOR THE RELEASE OF YOUR GIRLFRIEND.

HE WANTS TO SWAP KEA FOR THE TRIGON I!

WE CAN'T RETURN THE TRIGON I TO FROMM. WITH THE SATELLITE IN HIS HANDS, NO ONE ANYWHERE IN THE GALAXY WILL LIVE IN PEACE. BUT... WE HAVE TO FREE HER!

IF I AM READING R2-D2 CORRECTLY, I BELIEVE HE HAS A PLAN, THOUGH IT SEEMS TO ME VERY RISKY.

WHILE THALL AND JORD WATCH OVER THE TRIGON I, OUR DROID FRIENDS FLY TO FROMM'S HEADQUARTERS...

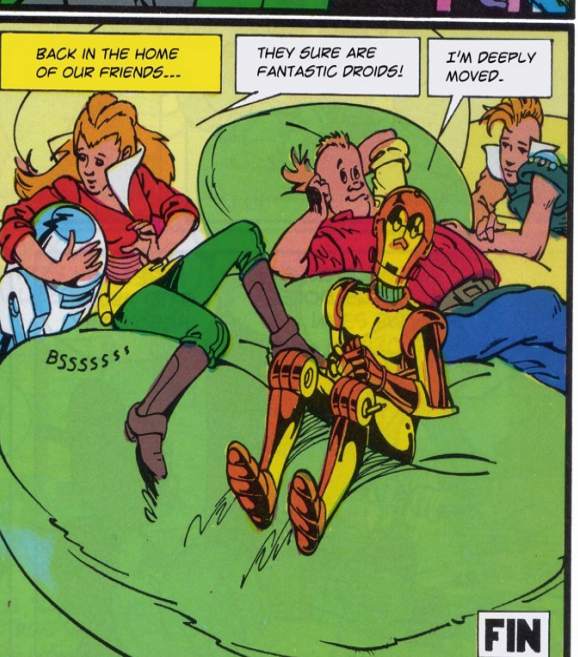
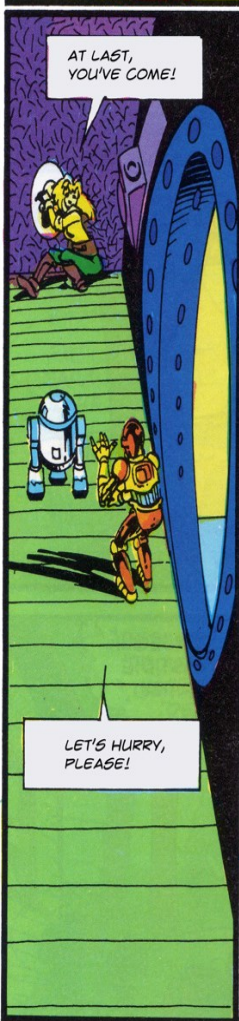
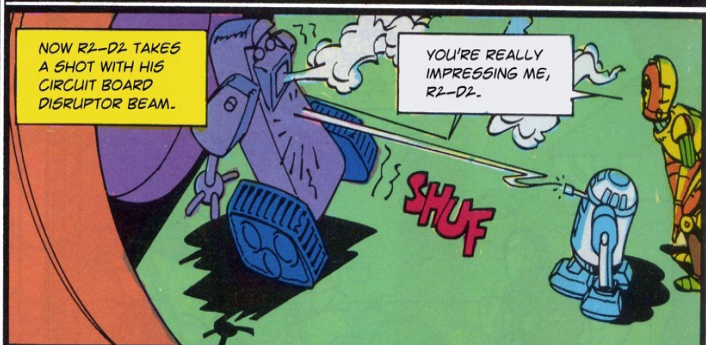
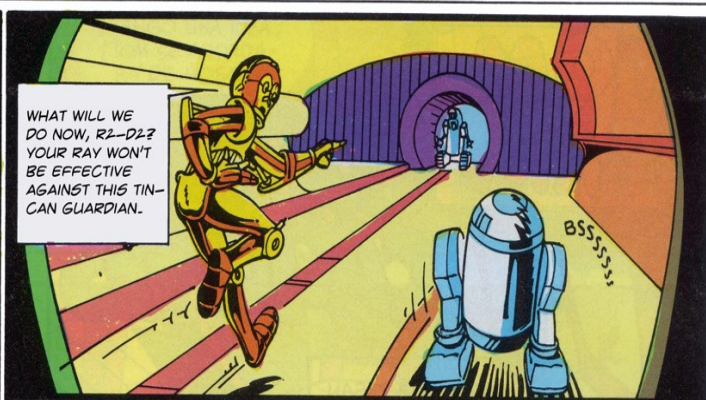
WE ALWAYS GET OURSELVES INTO THESE MESSSES. FORWARD, R2-D2!

WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING, LITTLE FRIENDS?

1-2

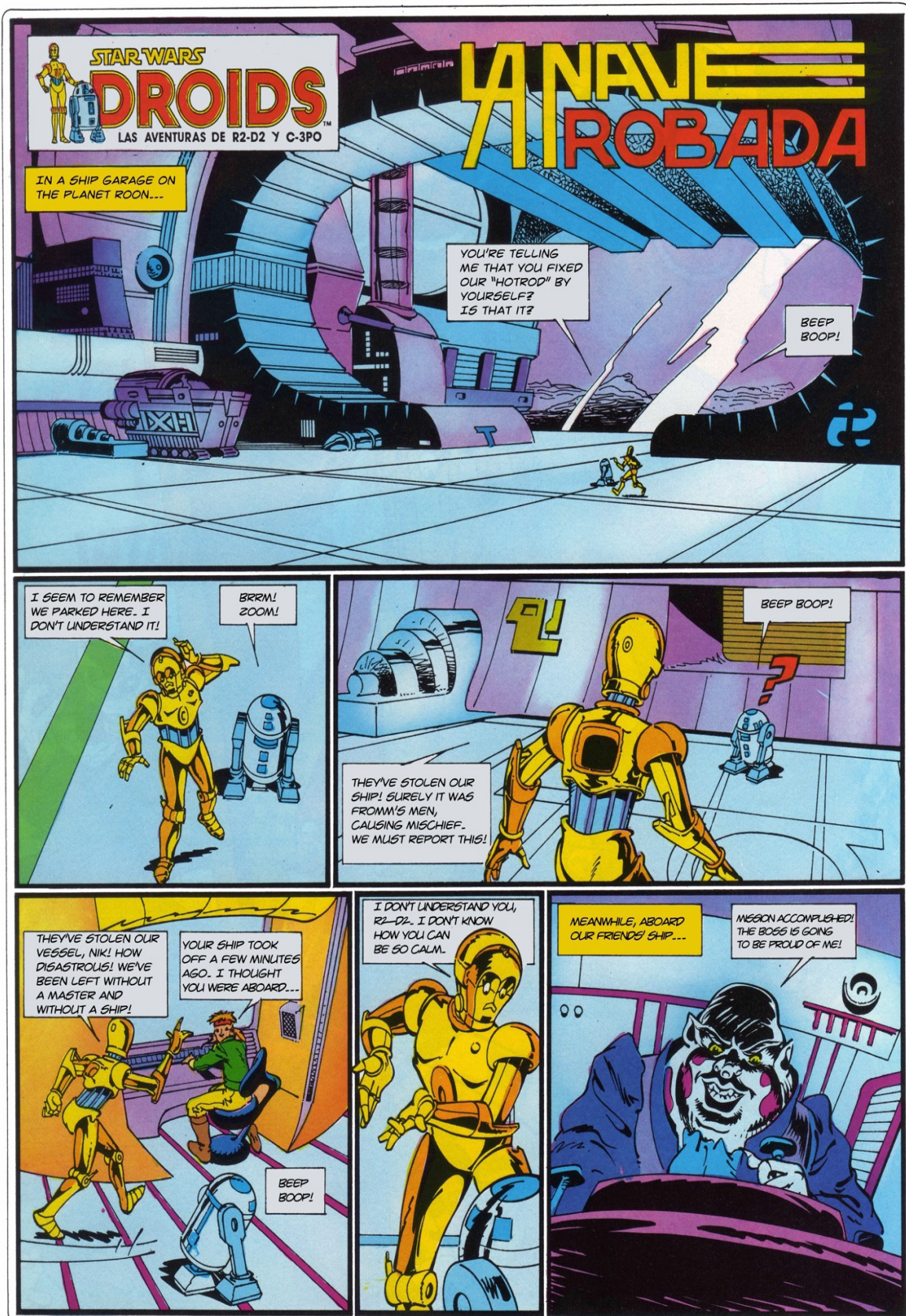
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FIN

STAR WARS DROIDS: THE ADVENTURES OF R2-D2 AND C-3PO IN THE STOLEN SHIP



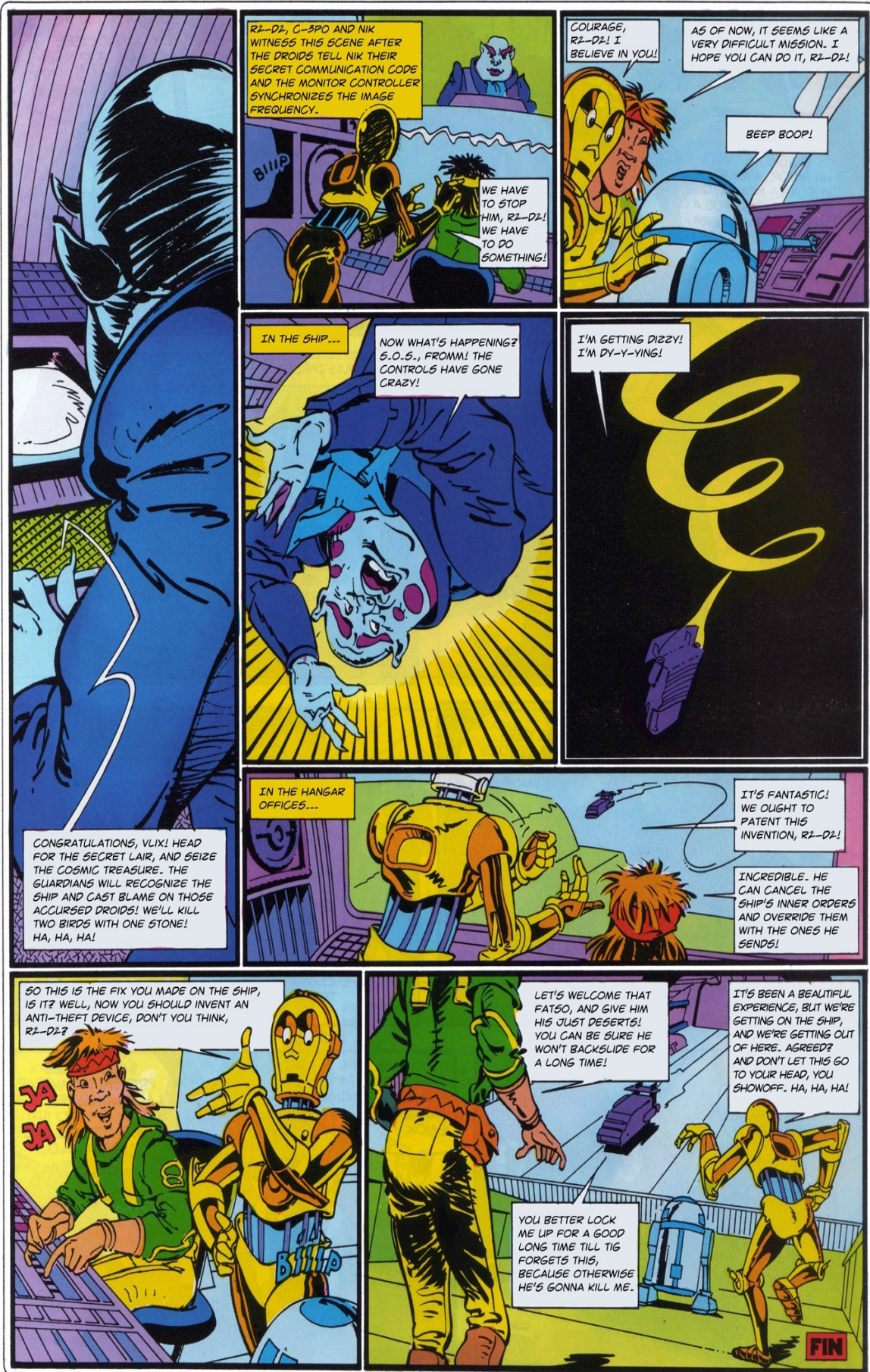
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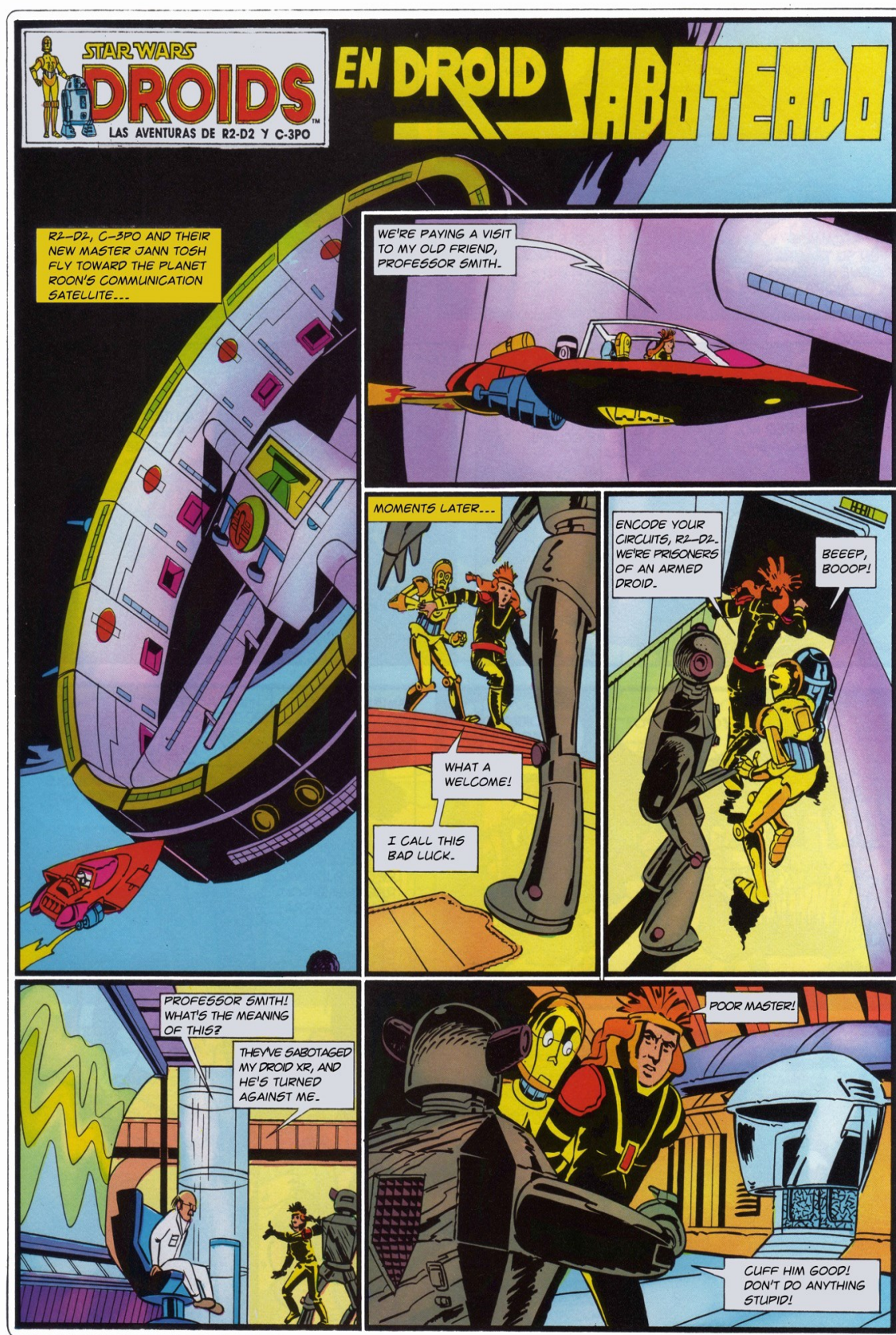
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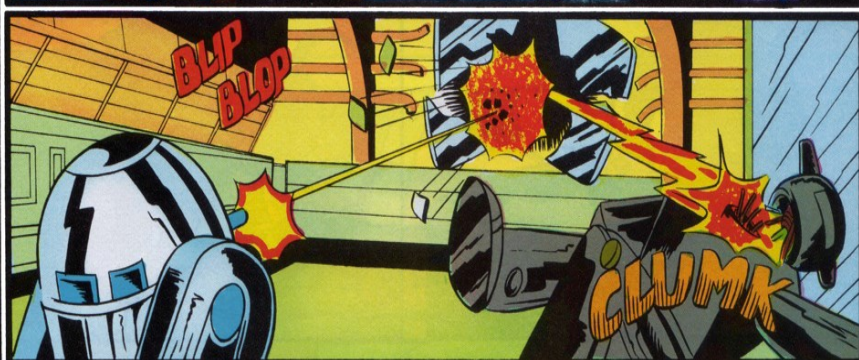
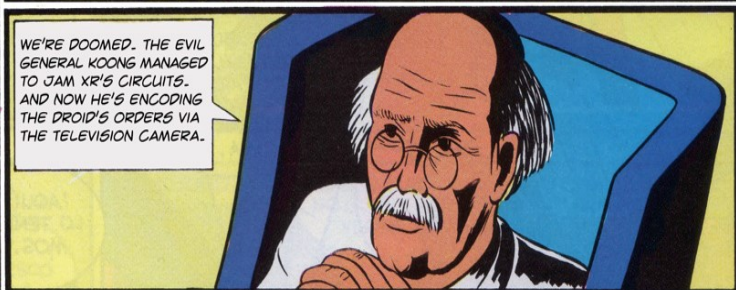
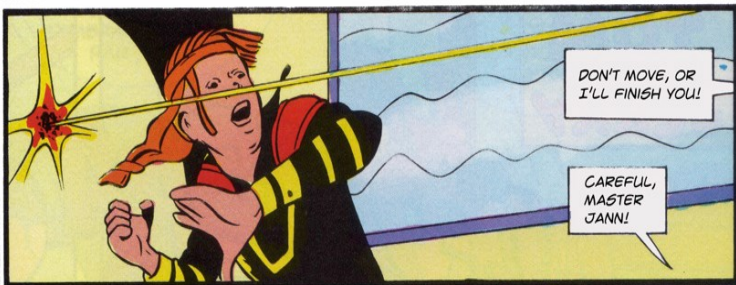
STAR WARS DROIDS: THE ADVENTURES OF R2-D2 AND C-3PO
IN SABOTAGED DROID



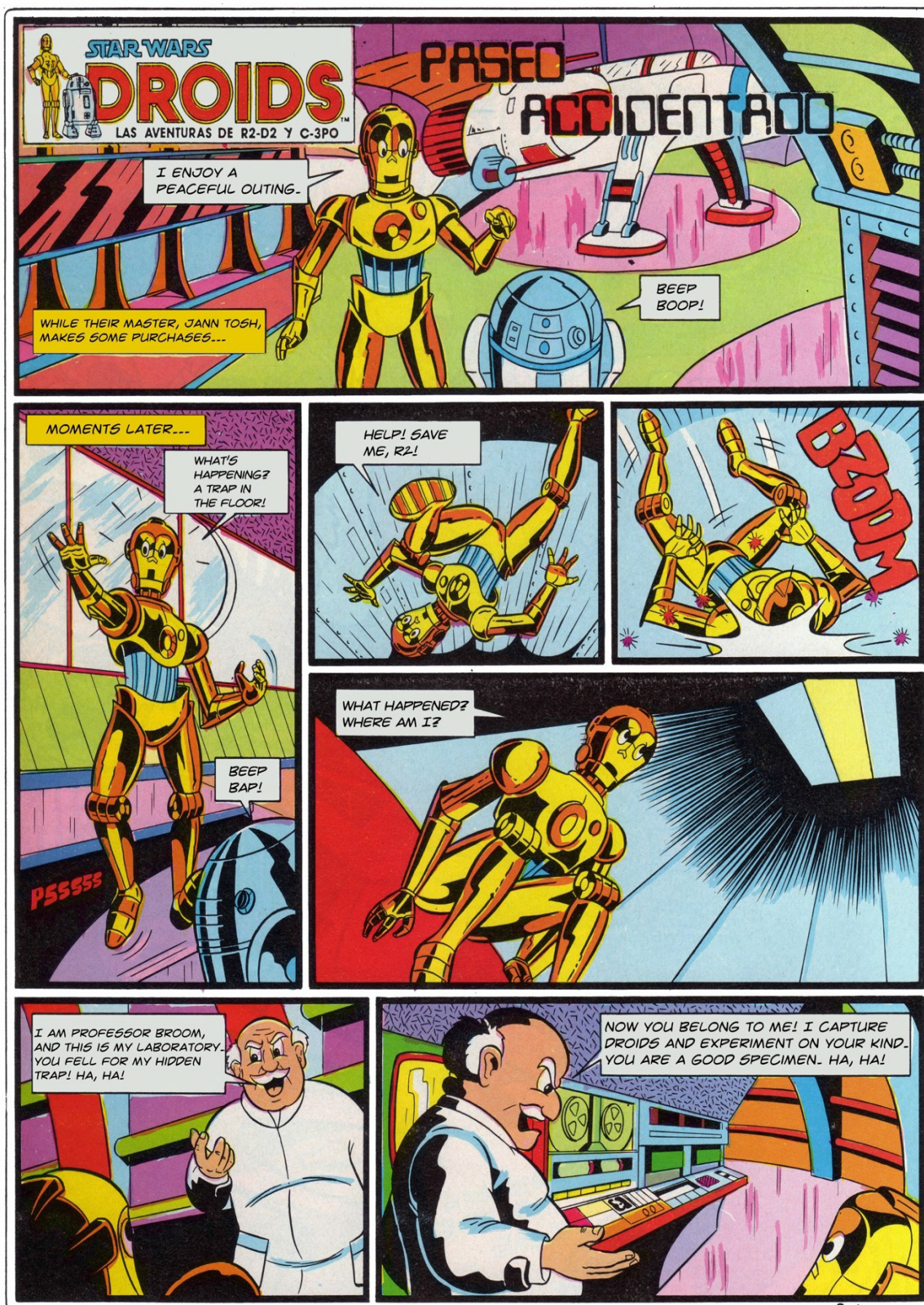
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STAR WARS DROIDS: THE ADVENTURES OF R2-D2 AND C-3PO
IN TROUBLESOME OUTING

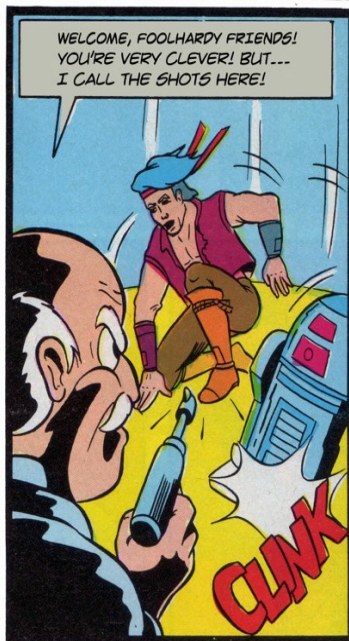
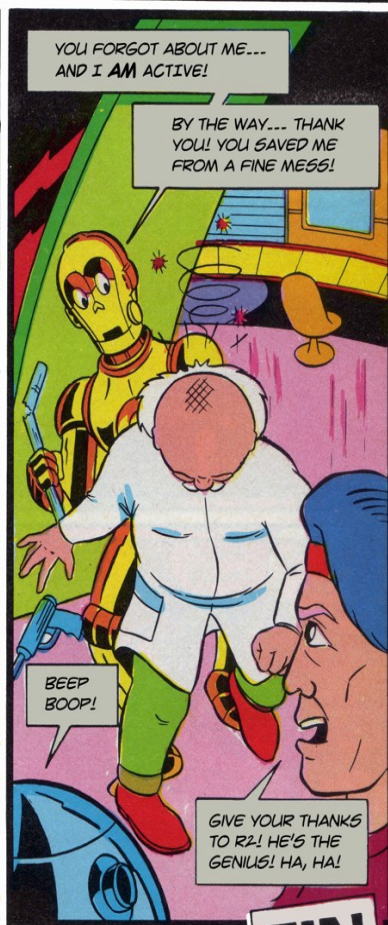
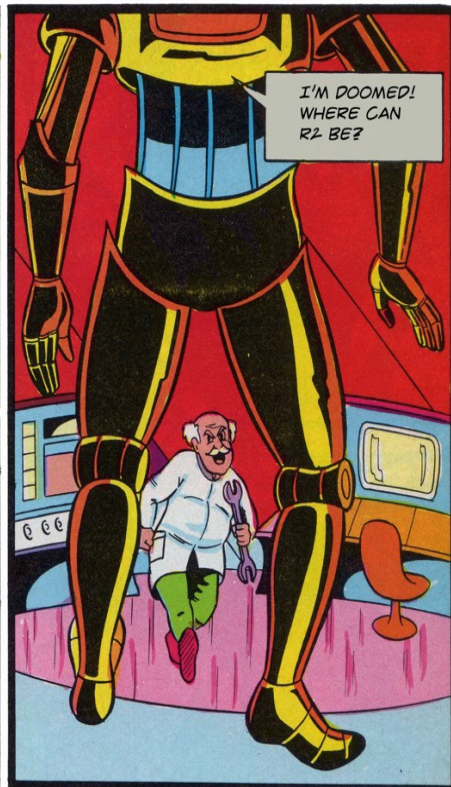


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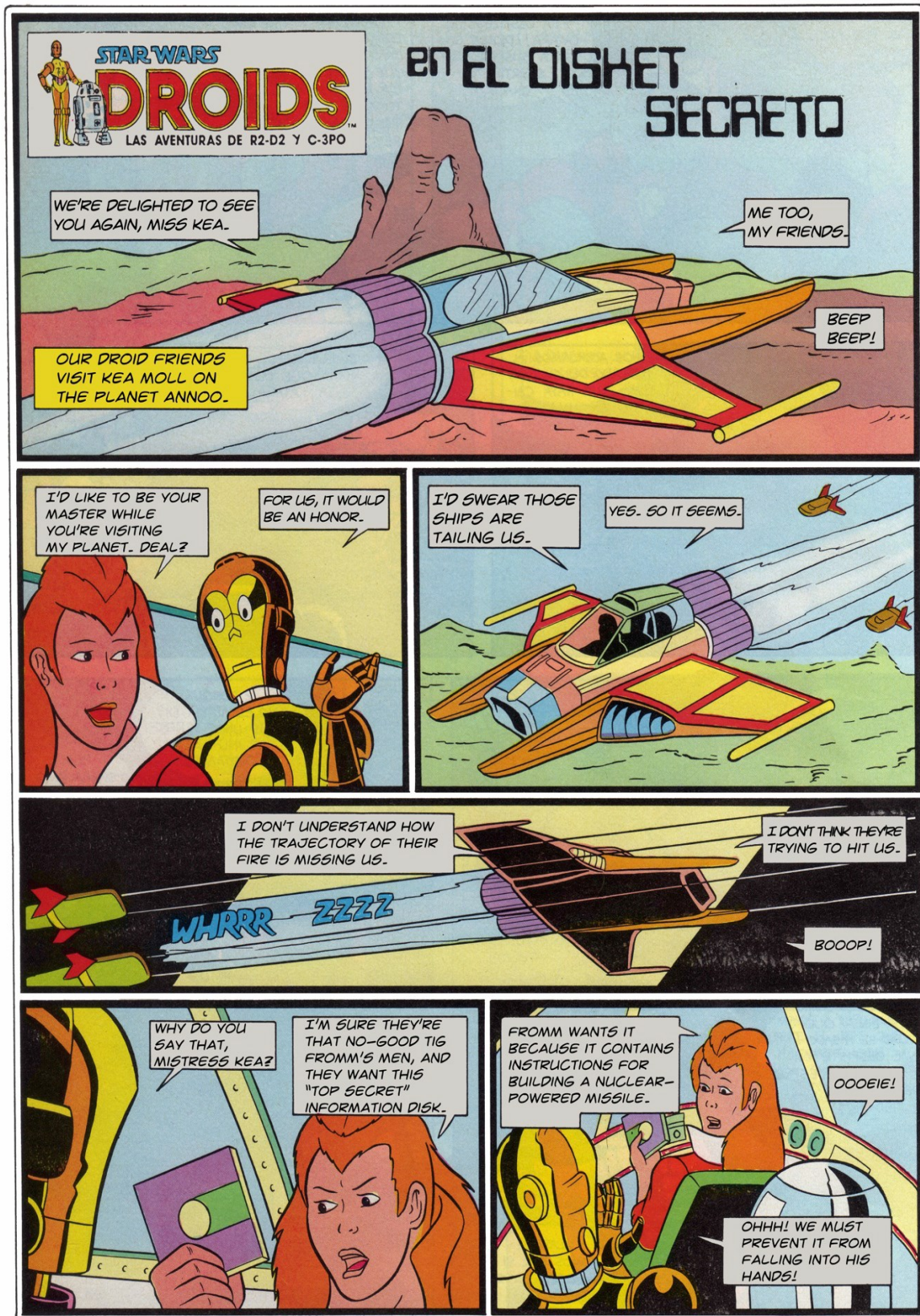
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FIN

STAR WARS DROIDS: THE ADVENTURES OF R2-D2 AND C-3PO
IN THE SECRET DISK



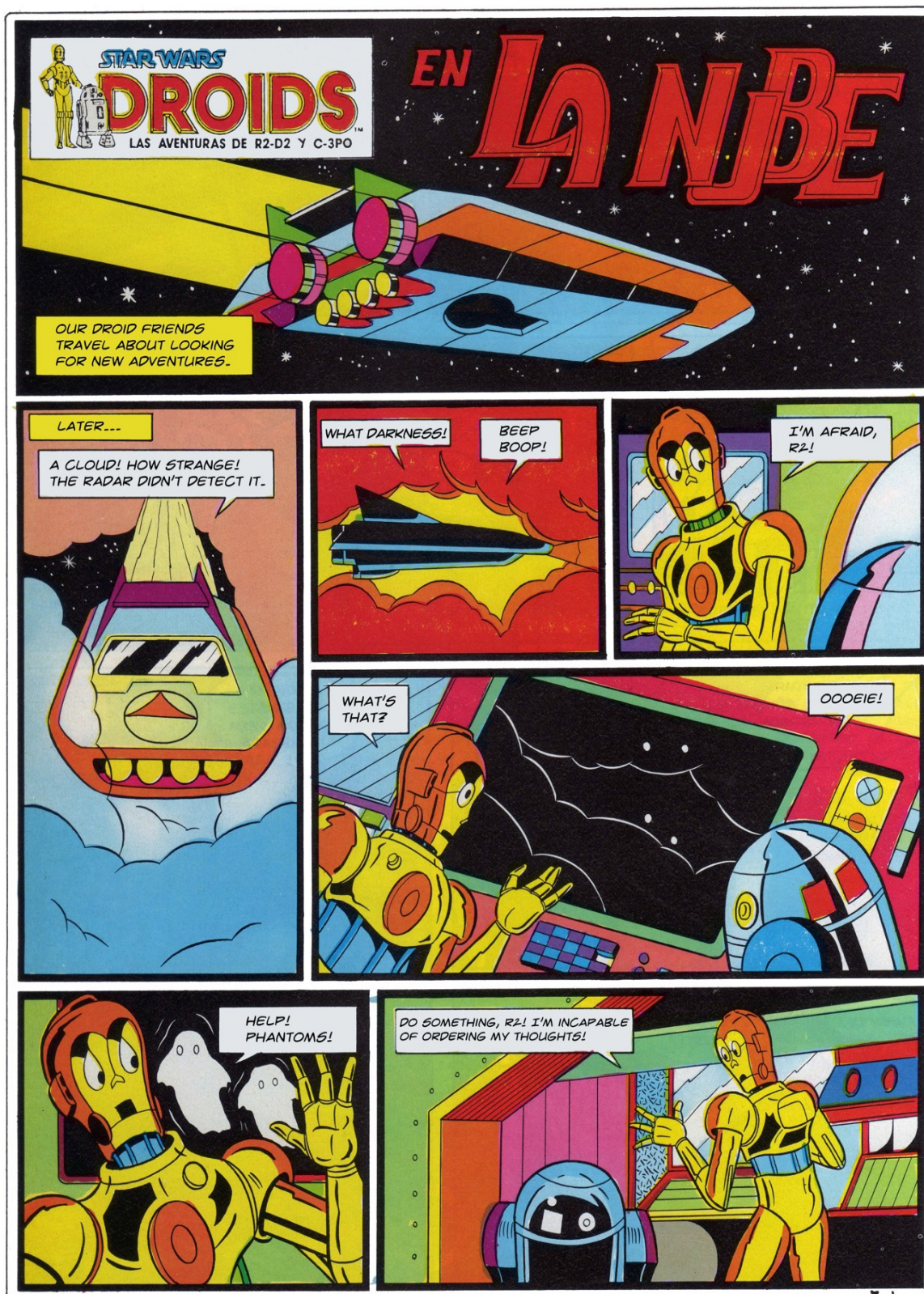
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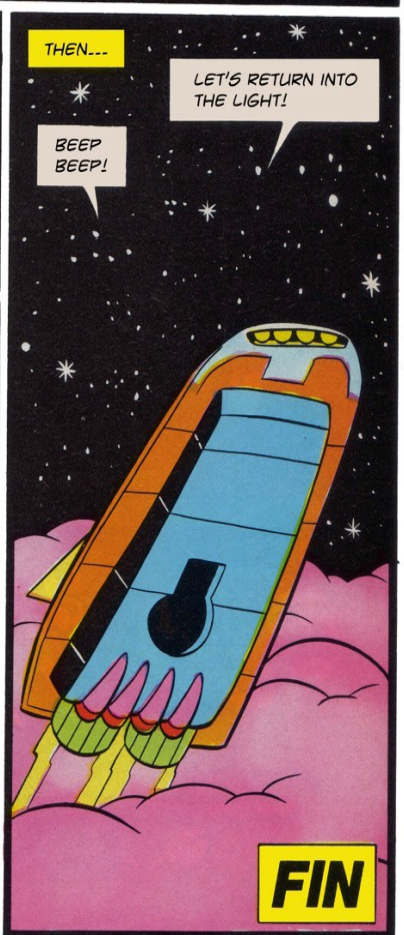
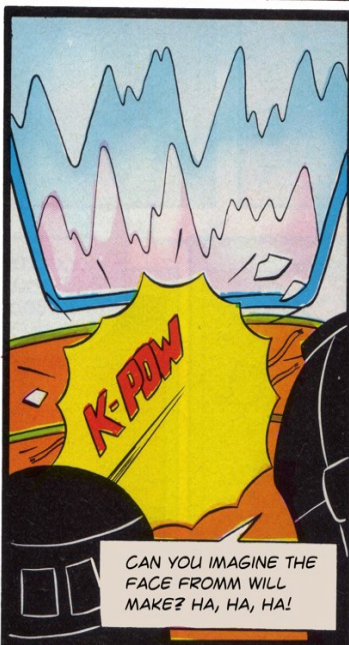
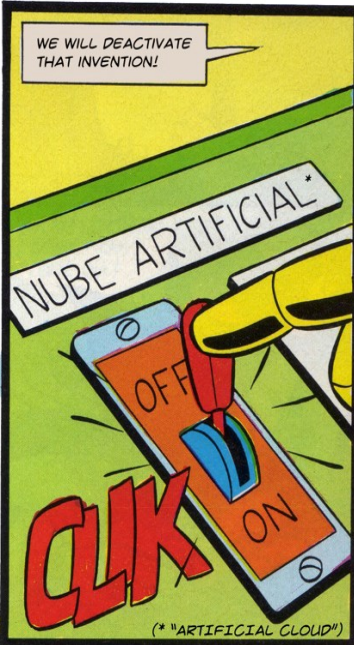
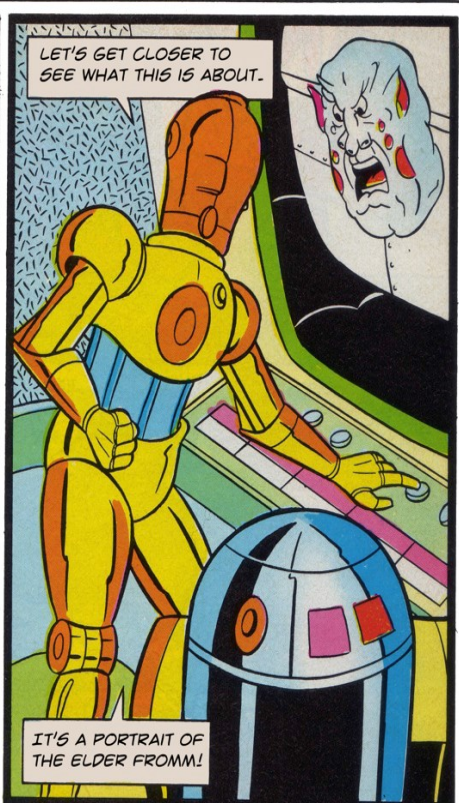
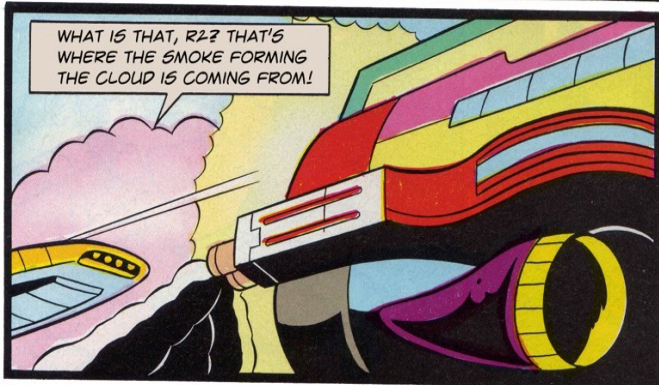
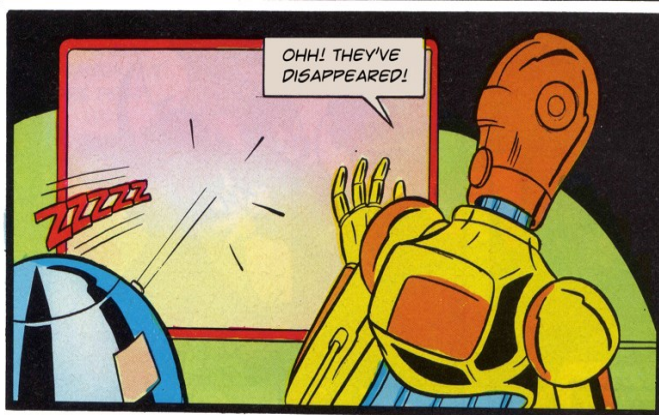
STAR WARS DROIDS: THE ADVENTURES OF R2-D2 AND C-3PO
IN THE CLOUD



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Live And In (Bleeding) Color ...

"... over here Andross! Keep that feed line clear. Watch your step!" Hailey LaMelle, Namore's hottest holonews reporter, gestured toward the distant figures across the plaza. "Can you believe it? That's Prefect Gerom, talking with Dasar Zorm, who happens to be just the biggest racketeer on the entire planet!"

"Make sure you're getting this all on holo ... " Hailey squinted as she peered through her own monocular lens. "Looks like Zorm is opening that suitcase ... " Her eyes widened. "Stang! Look at all those credits ... What's the Prefect handing Zorm? It looks like some sort of document pouch."

Hailey glanced back at her holocam operator. "Think this is some sort of payoff?" Andross was backing slowly toward the wall with a sick expression on his face. He lowered his holocam. She frowned. "Andross, what do you think you're *doing*? Keep filming!"

It was then that she felt the hard point of a blaster rifle nudge the small of her back. "Uh oh ... "

Just One Planetary Riot!

Governor Cathers drummed his fingers nervously on the burnished desktop of greel wood, a symbol of his power and prestige. He glanced down at the blaster burn that etched a ragged furrow into its gleaming surface and scowled. The Rebel monsters were growing powerful as well as bold. Last night's attack had come much too close to succeeding for his comfort. Had he been in his office ...

Cathers shuddered, and sighed with relief when his assistant doubted ushered in a tall man in full battle dress. The assistant bowed himself out of the room as the two men sized one another up. It was Cathers who backed down. There was something strange about this one, something he did not like at all. He couldn't quite explain it. The man's eyes shone with something ... it almost seemed like a feral anticipation of the hunt. Suddenly, he wished the assistant was back in the room.

The newcomer saluted. "I am Major Fenris Sarhl, commander of the CompForce Demnadi Relief Operation, part of the regiment assigned to pacify this ... *planet* of yours."

Cathers beamed. "Excellent, Major, excellent! I can't tell you how *delighted* we all are to see you. These rioters have obviously been suborned by local Rebel factions." He sank down into his chair with a heavy sigh. "They simply will not listen to reason, Major, and my militia forces are no longer sufficient to put them down. I *insist* you take action immediately."

"Of course, Excellency."

"Very good." Cathers squinted up at the young man he had temporarily acquired. "Tell me, Major, how many squads are in your Relief Force?"

"Just one, Excellency."

"*What* ... you mean they only sent *one* squad?"

"No, excellency, not one squad, one person. *I* am the Demnadi Relief Force."

"I don't understand!"

"Your communication *did* say you only had one planetary riot on your hands, did it not, Excellency?"

This One's Going To Be Close ...

Jandrell worked her hands as fast as she could. One slip now and the locking mechanism on the damaged air lock would jam for good. Curse that stupid *fedejik* of a pilot for trying to take his ship through a grade five asteroid belt! Now his precious ship was disabled, his ion drive close to superheating, and three small hull punctures were bleeding air out of the last intact cabin.

Jandrell glanced at the readings on her heads-up suit display and cursed. She tongued her comm mike open and yelled over to her partner floating three meters above her. "We only got a few more minutes, Mangrill. That blasted power plant is degrading fast."

Mangrill rotated his suit so Jan could see him nod in assent. He turned back and resumed work on his side of the airlock. Suddenly, she felt a dull thump vibrate through the hull as the airlock reseated itself. "I think we've got it!" She popped open the lock access panel and began to wire it back together.

Just then multiple indicators on her helmet display began flashing red warnings. Engine number two had just entered an overload spiral. Jandrell closed her eyes for a moment and redoubled her efforts. *Oh yes, she thought to herself, just another glorious day in the life of the Space Rescue Corps. Blast, this is going to be a close one ...*

This Must Be The Place . . .

From the memoirs of Shelby Tribold

The sign outside the sagging ferrocrete hut read "BaChorin's Spaceways, Unlimited." The "Unlimited" apparently referred to the amount of clutter inside. After struggling through a maze of overflowing file cabinets, we found ourselves deep in the heart of BaChorin's office. Wading our way through ankle-deep piles of old copies of *The Stellar Informant* and *Astrogration Today*, we reached the relative safety of a beverage-stained desk. Here a huge stack of unpaid bills and year-old data printouts threatened to defy the laws of gravity. From this vantage point we surveyed our surroundings. Worn-out floaters hovered precariously in the vicinity. A dented fizzyglug machine in the corner made noises I was sure it wasn't supposed to make. And everywhere we looked models of Imperial starships hung, ready to entangle the unsuspecting passer-by.

Suddenly Castrella clutched my arm in fright. Not three meters in front of us, a large furry hand — connected to an even larger, unwashed forearm — emerged from a pile of outdated star charts heaped over a worn-out grav lounge.

The appendage quivered and shook as it groped its way towards a half-eaten roast *fregeni* sandwich on a nearby lamp stand. As if guided by some unseen force, the paw reached

outward. An instant later it seized its prey in a vice-like grip. Slowly it reeled the prize back in. Castrella's fright increased all the more as, deep within that man-made mountain of charts, the sound of crunching could be heard.

Truth be told, I was considering a swift retreat myself. That is, until I spied the picture on the wall. There, in a cracked holo-frame, stood a burly man, surrounded by fellow starfighter pilots. The giant in the middle of the picture was hugging the stuffings out of a smaller comrade. To judge by the way his fellows were following suit, the flight commander was rejoicing over the return of a comrade feared lost in space. It was then that I noticed the unit patch on the giant's chest — the stylized design of a lightning bolt forking out in three directions. Startled by the discovery, I moved closer and, after a fashion, made out the nameplate on the giant's right forearm.

Elbren BaChorin! BaChorin of the 865th! By space, I should have known!

At that point, any doubts I might have had over our chances of survival quickly dissipated. I knew the man, as indeed, I knew the man he fought so hard to save when the others ran!

"Not to worry, my love," I reassured my companion. "I do believe this is the place we've been looking for."

"So, your friend's ship was hit by Buula's gang, huh? Yeah, I know where they're holed up. For 1,000 credits, of course.

"Thanks. Now, Buula's got his base way out in the Vessar Asteroid Field. At these coordinates, well, more or less...it *is* an asteroid field, you know. Anyway, it's a tough *gra-nut* to crack. Unless you have a small fleet, forget about frontal assaults. Your best bet is an attack with credits. If you offer enough cash, he just might sell back your cargo or your pals or whatever the *flag* he's got. I sure wouldn't just fly in and try negotiating, 'cause he's got a lot of firepower and a whole asteroid filled with pirates, outlaws, murderers, and slavers. Not a nest I'd stir up if I were you. He calls it his 'Rocky Home,' and definitely doesn't like uninvited guests."

—*"Captain Nomar" (believed to be an alias) to the crew of the freighter Laughing Dancer (now missing, presumed dead).*

"If you're looking for the best-defended black market in the galaxy, Petabys Station is the place to be...there are never pirate attacks and the place has enough defenses to hold off a small fleet. Of course, the rates are high, but what do you expect at a former battle station?"

—*Overheard comment in The Broken Tusk, Reuss VIII.*

"I don't understand what's wrong. You said we needed money, so I got us the highest paying run out there. It's just supplies for Keremark, not even weapons or anything. Just medical gear. I mean, it's even *legal*, so long as the political situation holds. We're not going to be detained. Everything will be fine. We get in, we unload the stuff and we leave. No problem. We are not going to be there during an attack. Besides, if we are, the place can handle it. There's few forts that can take on Imperial walkers and win, and this is one of them."

—*Overheard comment in The Pits (a cantina on Stend VI) by Captain Nuendo Rashh, prior to his arrest.*

"You're headed for the *ProfitSmasher*? You know why it's called that, don't you? Okay, here's the story. A couple of decades ago, the medium freighter *ProfitSeeker* ran into some serious trouble on some backwater planet. Her crew—completely broke and more than a little stupid—had hoped for an understanding meeting with their Hutt 'investor.'

"Not surprisingly, they had to make a run for it. You see, the Hutt was understandably, er, *irritated* at the crew's default on the loan payment. He sent out a shipload of his thugs and they shot the *ProfitSeeker* down over a steep canyon. The ship skidded all the way across the local landscape and dropped nose first into the depression. The crew never made a credit off that ship...and most of 'em are *still* locked in slave collars. 'Contract servitude,' the Hutt claims.

"But, that's not why it's called the *ProfitSmasher*. That's only the beginning. Since then, every two bit rogue across the Rim has tried to make the wreck a personal fortress or hideout. Every one of them has failed. I'm telling you, the ship is *jinxed*. Anyone who gets involved with the *flargin'* thing ends up broke. Smashed. Done for. Maybe literally. I can't remember who's out there now, but then, I guess you know. All I can say is, may the Force be with you...you're going to need it, grubber."

—Overheard conversation aboard *StarForge Station*.

"Good morning. I'd like to direct your attention to item number 41.2 on your datapads. We have received word that Estaria Central Starport has become a hotbed of smuggling and black market operations. As such, it falls to us to investigate and arrest those responsible. According to one of our informants, Estaria has become a common drop point for illegal goods, though most smugglers have decided to keep highly-illegal merchandise away

from the region. Estaria has good facilities for smugglers: semi-corrupt security, on-site warehouses, easy access to bureaucratic offices (to issue bribes, no doubt), and a steady stream of traffic to cover illegal activity. On the outside, Estaria appears to be a well-run, secure facility. On the inside, you can get away with murder. Estaria is corporate-owned, so investigations must be by the book at all times."

—Security briefing by Major Tel Terlou, Imperial Bureau of Taxation, Division Three.

"No, I'm sure our cover isn't blown. CorSec paid a fortune to set up these fake IDs and a plausible backstory for us... there's no way these amateurs have figured out we're the law.

"Okay, there's the trench. All we have to do is follow it south. They said the plant is on the eastern edge. Look, just pilot the sub, would you? Hey! Watch that... what is that, a fish? Well, never mind, it took off. Must of been more scared of us than we were of it. Oh *sure*, you weren't scared. You didn't even see it!

"Stang! Look at all the wrecks! Those look like old submersibles. Better be careful, mate. We don't want to get fouled on the debris. Looks like there was quite a battle down here.

"Okay, there's the plant. Head for Docking Station 3, down inside the trench. They said we make the deal inside."

"Uh, oh... tactical station reports torpedo lock! They're shooting at us! Evade! Evade!"

—Final data found on tactical station voice log from submersible starship Eldritch, lost during a CorSec sting operation.

Pog/29:3:3:91/Tra* The word is out you're after a professional military organization for a "special job." Look no further, because I've got your answer: ThunderForce. They're not the biggest merc force in the galaxy, but they're good. They can handle your job easily, I'll guarantee it. If you aren't convinced, I can arrange a tour of their headquarters. They've got a compound out on the Outer Rim, and they'll give you a good demonstration of their skills, no charge. They've got a nice setup: water-training, small-unit training, speeder forces, even field artillery. Keep in mind that they're strictly a ground-assault shop, but they can work with space forces and air support, no problem. They can even recommend a few good units for aerial use.

Convinced yet? You know they won the Battle of Binquaros, right? Contact me at Fathoms on Calamari by next week if you want me to set up a meet.

—Download from Cynabar's InfoNet.

"The Puddle. A true backwater, complete with the typical low-life expected from such a remote, barely civilized place. Not much there, 'cept at market time. If you're after something that the Empire doesn't want you to have, there's a better-than-average chance you can find it at The Puddle's marketplace. If you can't find what you're lookin' for, you can probably find someone who knows where it is. For a price, of course. If you have a hot cargo—spice, weapons, bacta—to unload, it is well worth your time to stop by.

"You might think The Puddle's a good place to lay low. You're right, if you're a small-time operator, but be careful if you have big money on you. Oh, it's far enough out in the boonies, but everyone there knows everyone else by sight. With the monthly market, it's not too long before anyone with a significant price on his head is ratted out. Still, if you keep to yourself, so does everyone else.

"If you have to stay there for more than a quick visit, make sure you get in good with Tilossa. He's the local kingpin. Tilossa's not that bad, really. He just wants to live and make a few credits. He's respected—even fair—so the regulars back up his plays and live by his rules. 'Course, he's also got a well-equipped personal security force...just in case.

"Almost forgot: Tilossa is a Gotal. Forget about hiding anything when you talk to him. He'll know. He always knows."

—Anonymous post to Cynabar's InfoNet

"All right, Golden Boy: you've got me, so start interrogatin'. Just hurry up, all right? I ain't got all day.

"Where did I disappear to after the Velx-Shel raid? Heh. I went native. That's right: I said 'native.' They don't grow you CorSec boys too bright, do they?

"Let me clue you in on an old smuggling trick, boy: if you have to hide out, hide out someplace *nice*. I found myself a deserted tropical island on a civilized planet, and lazed around in the sun for a couple of months.

"Why did I come back? Well, having pots of money doesn't do you any good out in the boonies. And besides, a pilot needs the stars. That's why you caught me. If I'd stayed put, you'd still be chasing yer tails."

—Excerpt from CorSec interrogation session 9812/ArTel. Subject: Arkle Tellaro, arrested for smuggling and blockade running.

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—Security briefing by Major Tel Terlou, Imperial Bureau of Taxation, Division Three.

"This is a joke, right? I don't care how many stormtroopers are coming. I'm *not* going in there. I'd rather rot in an Imperial cell."

—Attributed to Tosk Millano, a Corellian outlaw.

Jerel/33:2:4:21/Byb• Karbo is loaning us the use of his drop point for the exchange. Head to Telega Lake (coordinates attached to this file; use Phalanx Decode to unscramble). It ain't too cozy—unless you're a Mon Cal—but the location is secure. Just make sure you bring the merchandise. Otherwise, your grave site is going to be cold, dark and damp.

—Posting on Cynabar's InfoNet.

Entering "The Life"

"How'd I get started raidin'? Easy question, grubber. I was a navigator on a system-hopper, just a small-time operator, trading along the Shwuy Perimeter and in Parmic sector. Bad times. Hardly any trade flowing. The Empire's taxes made living next to impossible, though that idiot Moff Balfour made smuggling an easy option. I mean, it ain't like he actually knew what he was doing, right?

"Well, me and my crew fell short too many times; smugglers were thick as bog-ticks in those days, mostly because it was easy to get away with it. So we made up for the shortfall in profits by the occasional dirtside raid.

"Not regular, of course. Or maliciously. We only took from them who had more.

"Easy. Until we got caught by an Imperial patrol. So we ran.

"I drifted for a while, but the Imps got our transponder code, and that put me on the sector "Detain For Questioning" list. I couldn't find any straight work after my name went public, so I signed on as a navigator for a pirate ship. When that group fell apart — they do that after a while — I signed aboard another. Then another. Got to be my regular career.

"Sure, I'm tired of it. And you probably think I never should've started 'the Life.'

"But I don't answer to anybody except my captain and my mates. And they hold themselves accountable to me. Maybe I should've done something more 'civilized,' but I'm flamin' glad I didn't."

— Attributed to a member of the Khuiumiin Survivors

3 bby

The Lost City of Tatooine

Luke Skywalker raced his landspeeder across the wide-open salt flats of the desert planet Tatooine. The twin morning suns shone like star-bursts in the windshield, and the wind tousled his hair. "It's just as great as I always thought it would be!" the 16-year-old said. "I can't believe I finally saved up enough to buy my own landspeeder. It's freedom, Biggs!"

Luke's best friend, Biggs Darklighter, sat in the passenger seat, trading grins with Luke. "It runs pretty sweet, hotshot," he said.

"You don't think it's too beat up?" Luke asked.

"I think it's great," Biggs assured him.

Luke was staying with Biggs for a few days, since the harvest was in and his Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru could finally allow him some time away from the moisture farm. Luke was supposed to be sticking close to the Darklighter place, but the two friends had other plans. They were plotting to do a little exploring.

The bleached white domes of the Douz outpost appeared on the sandy horizon, and soon Luke was pulling up in front of a power station. The speeder needed a charge.

"Where are you two headed?" asked the old mechanic at the station, as he brought cables out to hook up to Luke's speeder.

"Metameur," Biggs said.

"We just want to take a look at the freighter landing pad there." "Maybe see a spaceship!" Luke added.

The old mechanic smiled. "Metameur's a long way"

"We figured we'd take a shortcut through Desolation Canyons," Luke said.

"Wouldn't recommend that," said the mechanic. "Might run into Sand People."

"We'll just be passing through," Biggs said. "We won't provoke them."

"Them Sand People are savages," the mechanic said harshly. "There's reason we call 'em Tusken Raiders. They'll kill anybody. They killed off all the Ghorfas, you know, and they'd kill you, too."

"Who were the Ghorfas?" Luke asked.

"Ghorfas were creatures that used to live out here, way back before the settlers came. You ever seen the slave hovels in some of the old towns?" Luke and Biggs nodded. "Most of those were built by Ghorfas and turned into slave quarters when the Ghorfas left," the mechanic explained. "You find their ruins in the desert sometimes, too. They built things; weren't nomadic savages like those Tusken Raiders riding their banthas all over the desert. All those Tusken ever build are walls around their sacred wells. Legends say there's a lost city of the Ghorfas out there somewhere, but anybody that's gone looking for it ain't come back."

As they zoomed away from the few build-ings that made up the Douz outpost, Luke considered the possibilities. "If we don't take the shortcut, we'll never be able to make it to Metameur before we have to turn back," he said.

"Looks like Desolation Canyons then," Biggs replied, with a grin. The rugged canyon lands rose on the horizon, and the boys turned off the regular route. Luke nosed the speeder through a gully in the lowlands and slowed as he steered through the hot rocky wastes.

Biggs glanced up as they saw the entrance to a large canyon far ahead. "Sky's darkening," he said with concern.

Luke looked behind them. "Oh, no," he yelled. "A sandstorm!"

"If it catches us in the open, we've had it!" Biggs said grimly. "Get into those canyons!"

Luke hit the accelerator. "I'm on it!" The two raced through the rough landscape, shooting around huge boulders and through arroyos. Luke was aiming for the canyons in the distance, but had lost sight of it in all the hills and valleys.

"Storm's getting closer!" said Biggs.

"I'm trying!" said Luke, as he sweated at the controls. He knew that if he wrecked the speeder they'd be in even more trouble. Biggs hit the switch that would close the speeder's canopy to a sealed bubble. The back half slid over them from behind the seat, just as the roar of the storm and its pelting sand caught up with them.

"I can hardly see anything!" Luke yelled. "I have no idea where we are going!"

"Hang on, hotshot, you can do it!" Biggs told him.

Luke fought to stay ahead of the storm's core. Soon, rock walls were visible in the sandy haze.

"Over there!" Biggs called out.

"The rock overhang," Luke said. "I see it." He nosed the landspeeder over to shelter under the protective mass of a great cliff. They opened the canopy.

"Look at that," Biggs said, glancing out into the canyon. "The storm's fading."

"Uh, Biggs," Luke said, his eyes peering toward the inner reaches of the cliff's hollow. "Look at this." There before them was a ruined adobe city, built into the cliff wall. A giant stepped structure in the middle was surrounded by several terraces of round and square dwellings with strange slots for windows.

It's the lost city of the Ghorfas!" Luke said in a whisper. The two boys cautiously moved through the silent city, their heartbeats seeming louder than their footsteps. Luke noticed a pattern in the way certain stones were put together. "Biggs, look," he said. "That wall there is built just like the walls the Tusken Raiders use around their wells. That's strange."

"But those ruins over there look just like the slave ruins in old villages, and the mechanic said the Ghorfas built those," Biggs said. He pointed out a mass of cell-like rooms piled atop each other, linked by narrow stairways. Then they found the tombs.

"These are Sand People tombs," Luke said uneasily. He recognized the crude rectangular slabs on the ground, with standing stones at each end. They stretched in lines deep into the shadows of the cliff hollow. "Uncle Owen and I found some by accident once and he told me what they were. He said we were lucky we were never seen near them or we'd have been killed."

"If these are Sand People tombs, then they must have killed all the Ghorfas who lived here and taken over their temple city," Biggs concluded.

Luke was walking farther back into the cave-like hollow of shadows. "The most recent graves are near the front," he observed. "There are older ones back here. Look how the shape changes."

"Right, and look how they start using little pictures carved into them rather than just the symbols the Sand People use," Biggs noted. "Those must be the Ghorfa tombs. Luke, where do the Sand People graves stop and the Ghorfa tombs start?" he asked.

"There's no clear dividing line," Luke said. "They just gradually change from one to the other. Strange. Why would the Sand People use the same cemetery as the Ghorfas they killed off?" Walking far back in the shadows, Luke found tombs that were much more carefully built and detailed, with many pictures covering them. He knelt to examine them. "Look at these pictures," Luke said slowly. "They show early settlers coming to Tatooine and using big machines to suck all the water wells dry."

Biggs knelt at another tomb. He could see from the cracks and the weathering on them that these in the back were definitely older, but the carvings looked much more advanced. And the pictures told a very clear story. "This one shows the Ghorfas dying of thirst," he said. "They didn't have enough water to stay in their city."

Luke looked back at the stone work and the line of tombs. He saw how they gradually changed to the rough, crude Sand People graves with only symbols and no pictures.

"Biggs," he said, "the Sand People didn't kill off the Ghorfas. They were the Ghorfas. And the farmers who settled in this area before us destroyed their culture by stealing all their water."

Biggs understood. "They had to become nomadic," he said, "And now they are the Sand People. They are the Tusken Raiders!"

"No wonder they hate us farmers," Luke said. At that moment Luke heard the very last sound he wanted to hear: the low guttural growl of a bantha in the canyon. And then he heard a savage voice ring out. There were Tusken Raiders out there, and they had spotted the landspeeder. Biggs and Luke sprinted for the speeder, adrenaline racing through their veins. They knew that they would certainly be killed if they were caught.

As they vaulted into the speeder, they saw six Banthas and at least two dozen Sand People in the far end of the canyon. Luke activated the jet turbines as the Raiders began to stream forward with hideous war cries. One of them hurled his gaderffii stick, a huge heavy metal club with a sharp pointed end. It hit the rear deck of the landspeeder and Luke could hear the windshield underneath cracking from the impact. But the turbines were suddenly at full blast and the hovercraft zoomed away.

They emerged into the rocky wastelands, only to find other Tusken Raiders lurking behind boulders. Luke repeatedly steered away from them, becoming hopelessly lost, until it seemed as if he and Biggs would never reach the dunes. And then there was sand ahead, and wide-open space, and the Desolation Canyons were behind them. They were safe. The two boys hardly spoke as they made their way back to the Douz outpost by the light of the setting suns.

When Luke was home again days later, he started to tell Uncle Owen over dinner about his adventure.

"Desolation Canyons!" said his gruff Uncle. "If I'd thought you'd go near that area I would have taken that land-speeder away from you. It's too dangerous."

"But what if there was something to learn?" Luke pressed. "This legendary lost city...it might help us understand. .. things. Maybe we could learn to be at peace with the Tuskens. I think you need to understand the past to understand the present."

"No, Luke," Uncle Owen replied softly. "The past is best left alone."

Luke went out and looked at the sunset from the edge of the lonely crater that was his home. "The past does hold clues," he thought to himself. "And now

I know who the Sand People really are." Luke wondered what clues his own past held. Why did he always yearn for something more than the farm? What had his father been like? Someday, perhaps, he would learn. Someday the past would help him understand who he was, too.

The Pit

The following story is a tale of Luke Skywalker's youth, told to Voren Na 'al by the Jedi himself.

Sandsurfing was one of the more exciting and stupid recreational activities enjoyed by the wild youths of Tosche Station in Anchorhead. It was created by a young man by the name of Fixer. Bested once too often at Skyhopper racing and womp-rat hunting by young Luke Skywalker and his daredevil friend Biggs Darklighter,

Fixer came up with a sport of his own - something at which he could be better than anyone - even if he killed himself in the process. The "sport" involved being dragged behind a sand skiff which was traveling at tremendous speeds. The surfer was connected to the skiff by a slim cord attached to a set of handles, and was supported by a pair of repulsor disks attached to his feet. When the skiff moved, the surfer would skim over the surface of the desert behind it, skipping on the sand and performing wild flips, twists and other fancy maneuvers on the sloping dunes.

Naturally, the best place for sandsurfing was the Dune Sea. Its great expanses of unobstructed sand and countless dunes provided the most challenging venue for the serious sandsurfer.

Fixer, being as serious as they come, would only surf in the Dune Sea. Never the ones to back down from a challenge, Biggs and Luke took up surfing those slopes as well. The Dune Sea had the added virtue of being remote and virtually uninhabitable, seriously lessening the chances of being spotted by nosy adults.

Much to Fixer's dismay, Luke and Biggs were good at sandsurfing. It seemed that Fixer's plan to create something he could embarrass "those two lucksters" with, had backfired severely. After Biggs performed three consecutive doubleflips, even Cammie was impressed, and she hung on Biggs's arm at the

victory celebration back at the station. This was more than Fixer could take. Cammie was his girl, and no showoff was going to steal her.

The next morning, Fixer made everyone pile into their skyhoppers and follow him out to the Dune Sea. He told them he was about to attempt the "greatest stunt of all time." By the time they realized what he was up to, it was too late. Fixer didn't use a driver; instead he pre-programmed the skiff's auto-pilot to drive itself.

This was unusual, but not particularly so: If the programmer was good, he could get the skiff to perform maneuvers with accuracy and timing that few humans could match. Of course, the programmer could also program the skiff to perform maneuvers that few humans would be crazy enough to match...

Fixer's great run started out well. He hit the half-moon just right, and performed as neat a twisting half-gainer as you would ever like to see. He followed with several loops, and finally did a double backwards loop - something no one had ever done before.

His friends, watching from repulsorcraft high above, thought that this was the big finish to his run, and moved down to congratulate him.

"That guy's crazy, but boy can he surf," Biggs said admiringly, and Cammie's eyes were shining.

Everybody was quite taken aback when the skiff suddenly sped up, took a sharp 45 degree turn, and headed straight for the Pit of Carkoon!

There was no time for anyone to stop him. As the skiff brought Fixer parallel to the infamous pit, the group could only watch in horror as the young fool angled himself for the jump.

It was obvious that Fixer had planned this from the beginning. A makeshift ramp of sand was hastily formed at the edge of the pit, providing Fixer with the lift he would need to clear the perilous expanse, and a similar ramp at the other end gave him a safe place to land. Fixer hit the take-off ramp perfectly, sailed through the air ... everybody held their breath... and he fell half a meter short, slamming into the side of the Pit and disappearing into a giant explosion of sand.

The crash itself didn't particularly worry his friends - they had all survived worse with little more than cuts and bruises, and the sand in the pit was notoriously soft. It was what lay at the bottom of that infamous hole that had everyone swooping down on the crash site in a millisecond.

Cammie was there first, tears streaked across her worried face, and Luke had to stop her from diving head-first into the pit after Fixer. Biggs approached the pit more cautiously, flying directly above it, a good four meters in the air. After seeing to Cammie, Luke joined him in his skiff. Biggs pointed down grimly. It was bad. Fixer was unconscious. He lay facedown in the sloping sand, and he was steadily slipping into the mouth of the Sarlacc. He was falling very slowly; perhaps there was still time to save him.

Suddenly, a disgusting pink tentacle emerged from the Sarlacc's mouth and began probing blindly at the sand! It was only a matter of seconds before it found Fixer's body.

Biggs acted without hesitation. Tying a cord around his waist, he tossed the other end to Luke, and began to rappel down the pit. The footing was just about non-existent - the shifting sand gave way beneath his feet - and he had to move with care to avoid pushing his unconscious friend in deeper.

Just as he reached Fixer, the tentacle reached the boy's body and wrapped tightly around his chest! Holding desperately onto the rope with one hand, Biggs drew his vibroblade and began slashing at the tentacle with all his might.

As Biggs worked, another one of those evil appendages began snaking its 'way up toward Biggs. Another one followed it. And another. And another. Sweating with fear for his friends, Luke tied the rope to his skiff and drew his punch gun. The angle was lousy, the range was too long, but they were just about out of options. He shut one eye, held his breath, and fired off oneshot, neatly severing the tentacle around Fixer.

Shouting "Grab Fixer, Biggs!" Luke shot his skiff straight up into the air, dragging the two young men from the pit, milliseconds before the tentacles got there.

All things considered, Fixer got off easily. He suffered a mild concussion and a broken nose - the mild concussion from the crash, the broken nose from Cammie after he healed up from the concussion. He spent two weeks in the

Anchorhead med-center, and the month afterward grounded at home.

Luke and Biggs readily admitted that they could not duplicate his stunt - he was the king of the sandsurfers, and welcome to it. Somehow, that didn't make him feel as good as he thought it would.

His Finest Work

Garrbo V'Droz was the best in the galaxy at his job, and he would have been the first to say so to anyone who would listen.

He was one of the most startlingly intelligent and talented architects in Imperial space, and as much as most people hated his attitude and arrogance, they could not help but admire his talent and his work. His designs graced Imperial City and many of the Core Worlds, and he was revered as one of the most talented sentients ever to enter the architectural field. Garrbo V'Droz was currently singing the praises of his latest work to his current customer.

"As you can see," the pompous, green-haired architect drawled, "the design fits your specifications *perfectly*. "

"I see," said the patron calmly, admiringly taking in the workmanship of the room, which V'Droz's own construction crew had built. The patron's wrinkled, pale hand patted the stone wall appreciatively, and his yellow eyes glittered with pleasure.

Another satisfied moron, thought the architect smugly.

"The maze is fiendishly difficult. It actually stumped one of the worker droids this morning. Screwed his little guidance system right up," V'Droz smirked. *Of course it did. It was supposed to.*

"While the maze itself is capable of testing the intellect of most people, I've added a little security bonus, though I'm sure you'll probably figure it out."

Garrbo V'Droz was hopelessly obnoxious when he was proud of his work. He was *very proud* at the moment. "You see, I've added an interesting little trac-reflective material in the walls. No sensor map of the labyrinth will be the same twice."

The patron nodded his approval, ignoring for the moment that he had suggested precisely that feature in the original design.

"The entrance to the crypts is located in the labyrinth, right where you asked for it. I've provided a map for you," V'Droz said, ignoring the sharp look his employer gave him when the foppish architect brought the labyrinth's schematics up on his datapad. "Though why you want a bunch of stone tablets and mystic trinkets cluttering up the bottom of a mountain I'll never know. Anyway, they're all moved in."

Garrbo V'Droz had heard his employer had something of a temper, but was hard pressed to believe this little man was much of a threat. *At least his credits are good.*

"The main chamber is over a kilometer down, and you can descend by stairs or by repulsorlift shaft," he concluded.

"I wish to see it," his employer said simply. "Let us **go**."

Shrugging, the architect brushed his hand through his emerald hair, leading the way through the labyrinth, eventually stopping and gesturing towards an artfully concealed turbolift shaft. "After you," he said.

"No," his patron said, starting towards an equally well concealed stairwell. "This way is more ... fitting."

"Whatever you say," V'Droz smirked. *No, he thought, this little man is no trouble to please. No trouble at all.*

He shivered briefly at the memory of the previous months of construction and the armored figures that had carried the various objects and artifacts into the subterranean tomb. His patron was walking ahead of him, leading him deeper into the maze. Despite the glow rods that each held, the gloom and darkness seemed to overwhelm them the further they traveled down the twisting staircase.

Eventually, they entered the crypt itself. The crypt was almost completely dark, and the light from Garrbo V'Droz's glow rod bounced off the walls and floor

eerily. While he projected an air of confidence, the arrogant building designer was scared. Very scared.

He glanced uneasily at row upon row of the "treasures," all lying on stone shelves carved in the rock. His patron had odd tastes: ancient energy weapons, amulets, crystals, alien trinkets and religious idols, mummified bodies - and countless other things the architect didn't want to know about.

Garrbo V'Droz was pleased by the unnatural atmosphere that the room possessed; as much as it unnerved him, it fitted the requested design perfectly. But something nagged at him, something ... familiar ...about the objects in the crypt. Glancing at the nearest crypt chamber, he saw the body of a powerfully built Human dressed in brown robes, clutching a metal cylinder to his chest. *What in the suns is that?* he wondered.

"How many copies of the map to the labyrinth have you made?" asked his employer. His vaguely serpentine voice echoed in the stillness of the tomb.

"Just the one on my datapad," answered the architect, still peering intently at the next row of objects he passed. *Are those metal cylinders ... lightsabers?* "Why?"

"No reason," his employer chuckled.

Garrbo V'Droz almost dropped his glow rod when it shined off a face he recognized in one of the chambers. There was a grim smile on its face. The green-haired occupant of the chamber was someone with whom Garrbo V'Droz was intimately familiar: his brother, the construction foreman.

Whirling on his patron, he whimpered, "What is the meaning of this?"

Emperor Palpatine smiled and said simply, "It means that you and I are the only ones left who know the way through the labyrinth to my ... home for treasures too valuable even for my museum above. And soon, it will just be me," the Emperor grinned horribly, as Garrbo V'Droz cowered.

"Don't worry, my friend," hissed the dark figure, gesturing grandly at a vacant spot in the chamber, "you shall have a place of honor here. You've earned it."

Palpatine raised his hands, preparing to strike, and then, allowing himself a final moment to savor the fear in his victim, added, "And if I ever need your services again, I will not hesitate to clone you."

V'Droz cringed as the Emperor threw vicious bolts of lightning from his hands and ensured that the galaxy's finest architect was forever a part of his last, greatest work.

Public Prosecutor

Dol Captison watched sadly as his younger daughter Ylanda slunk back to the dining table, round-shouldered with defeat. She plunked down on her chair and stared at her melting dessert.

"You've calmed?" Dol's wife Marga asked gently. "Did you call one of the Zanazi?" Marga's green eyes were framed with weariness lines; a sense of sadness slowly crept across her face.

Ylanda batted a strand of blond hair away from her eyes, but she didn't answer. At 14, she was taller and heavier than Marga or her older sister Gaeriel. Dol guessed he'd probably indulged her too much over the years, guessing this day would come too soon — for all of them.

It had. A small, empty golden bowl sat beside Ylanda's drinking glass. Dol and Marga had chosen.

"I'm sorry, Landy." Gaeriel sat across the table from Ylanda. Under the table, she held a small white feather. She flicked it with one finger. "I didn't mean to —"

"To gloat," Ylanda snapped.

Gaeri blushed, obviously embarrassed. She was 16, ready to graduate from Gesco Preparatory. Last week, the long-awaited aptitude tests had been administered. As Dol and Marga expected, Gaeri scored significantly higher. Tonight, they had given their daughters the Bowl and Feather that symbolized the paths they must follow for the rest of their lives. Gaeriel would receive the education offered at the Bakur Senatorial Academy in Salis D'aar, and Ylanda ...

Dol's stomach churned. He and Marga had each grown up with the Feather. In the Life To Come (if it really existed), they would give up the advantages they'd enjoyed in this lifetime. Balance had decreed that Dol's brother Yeorg would carry the Bowl for their generation, but he had left the Faith.

Maybe Ylanda would, too. Tonight, Dol understood how it must've grieved his own parents to give Yeorg a small golden bowl for his only inheritance. A bowl like Landy's bought its owner one place in a Simple Home, where he — or she — would spend the rest of this life. Dol had been shocked to receive the Feather. He'd thought Yeorg would score higher on the tests. So, obviously, had Yeorg. He'd left home and never looked back.

"This is the way of life, girls." Marga pushed back her plate. "The offer is generous. All of Gaeri's costs will be covered. She will be able to stay with Uncle Yeorg."

He touched Ylanda's plump hand. "Yours is the finer calling, Landy."

Blond hair had fallen over her eyes. "A thousand years from now, I'll have everything. She'll have nothing."

"Not nothing, dear." Marga raised a fine eyebrow. "She won't be stripped of everything, like ..."

"Like a Jedi?" Gaeri interrupted brightly. Yesterday at Simple Home, a Zanaz had preached on extremes: the Jedi took so much in this life that the Balance decreed that they have nothing in the Life to Come.

Dol nodded, then looked hard at Gaeriel to make sure she understood what Ylanda's sacrifice meant. They were a family, a whole, a Balance. "This is the way of life ... of accepting what we are offered. The Balance must be preserved in all things."

Gaeri smiled. "Father, you give so much of yourself. I'll do the same. I promise."

Ylanda smirked. "You can't prepay the next Life. I can. The Zanazi say —"

"Landy," Dol said firmly, "the subject is closed. Finish your meal."

Namco Bandai Games and StarWars.com Present



A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

STAR WARS: VISIONS OF THE BLADE

The Jedi of old knew the universe to be boundless, and that the Force itself twists and winds through innumerable corridors. Through the Force, a skilled Jedi could see visions of other worlds, other futures, and infinite possibilities. It was a talent available to the Sith as well.

A formerly forbidden area of space, deep within the Cowl Crucible has drawn the attention of smugglers and thieves who discovered trace deposits of rare and valuable cortosis within. A world full of such riches must lie somewhere inside the nebula, waiting to be exploited, but none seem to have the navigational skills required to penetrate the luminous veil. Only through the Force could such a hazard be braved....

Illustrated by Tom Hodges; Lettered by Grant Gould



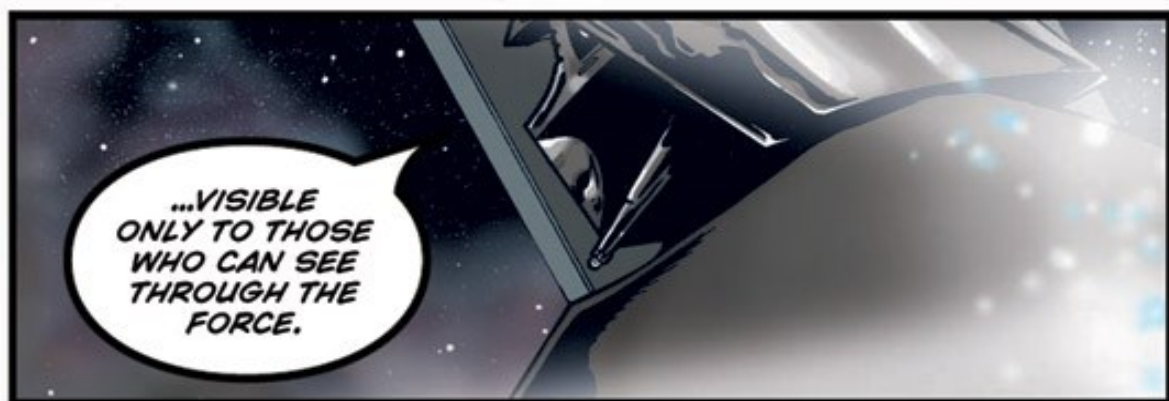
CAPTAIN WERMIS,
THE MINERS ARE
RETURNING FIRE!

LET THE
VERMIN FLEE, HOW
PATHETIC THEIR LOT MUST
BE TO RISK THEIR LIVES
FOR MERE GRAMS OF
CORTOSIS.

BRING THE SHIP
DEEPER INTO THE
COWL, CAPTAIN.

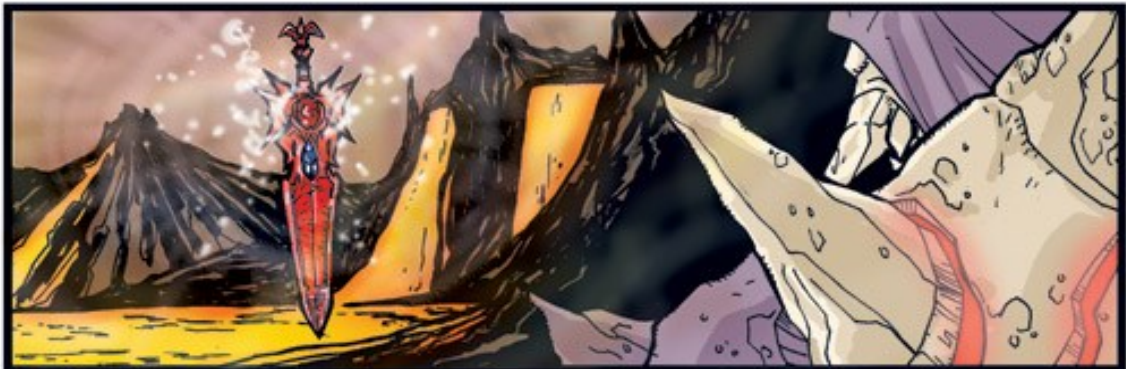
MY LORD?
THE ENERGY
SHEARS
OFF THAT
NEBULA
ARE --

DO NOT WASTE
MY TIME WITH YOUR
COWARDICE, WERMIS.
THERE IS A CLEAR PATH
AHEAD OF US...











THIS IS NO COMMON
VERGENCE, MASTER YODA.
UNNATURAL POWER RESIDES
WITHIN... POWER FROM
BEYOND THE FORCE.



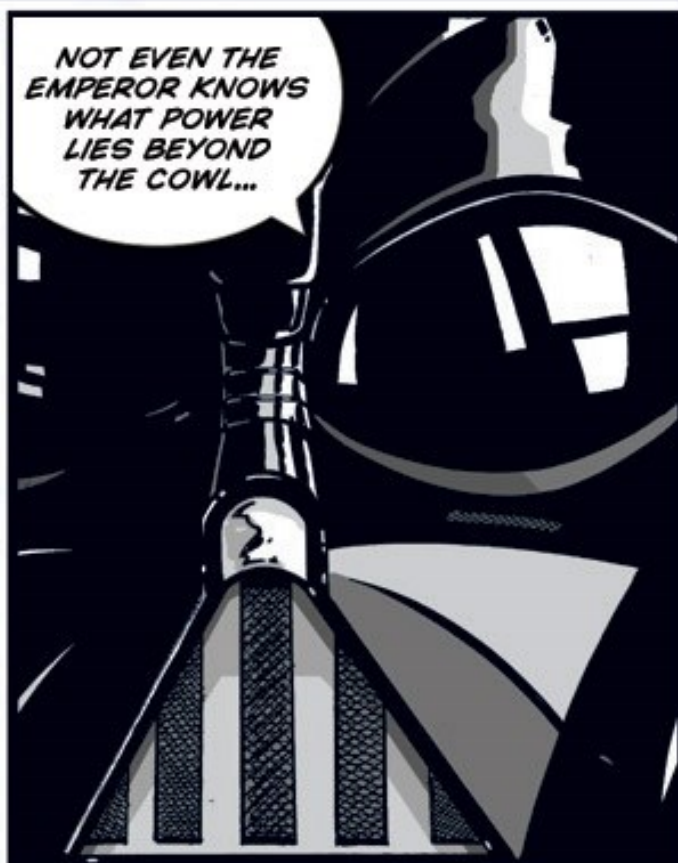
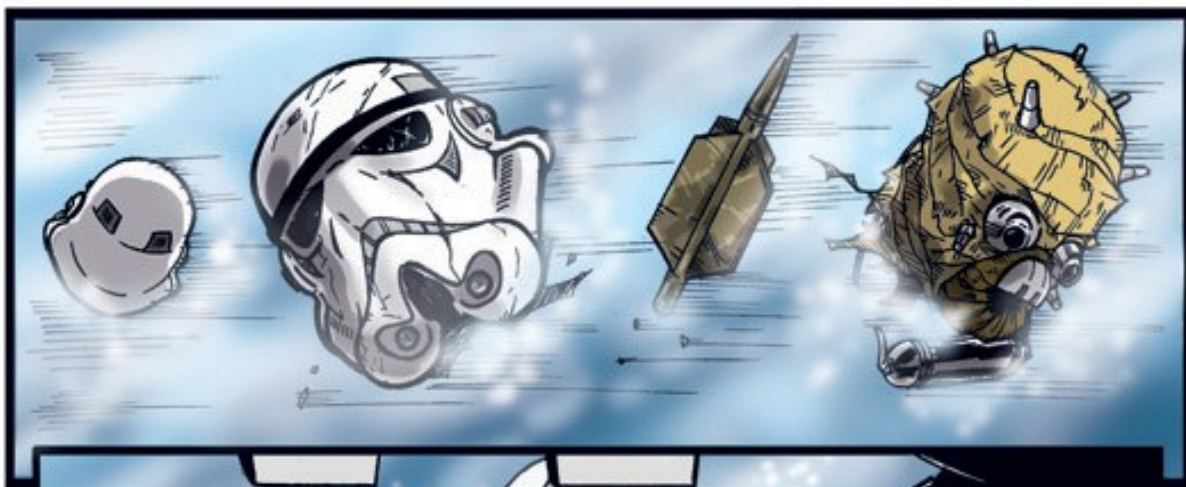
YET IN EXILE
I AM. OUR ALLIES
ARE SCATTERED. NOT
READY, THE NEXT
APPRENTICE IS.

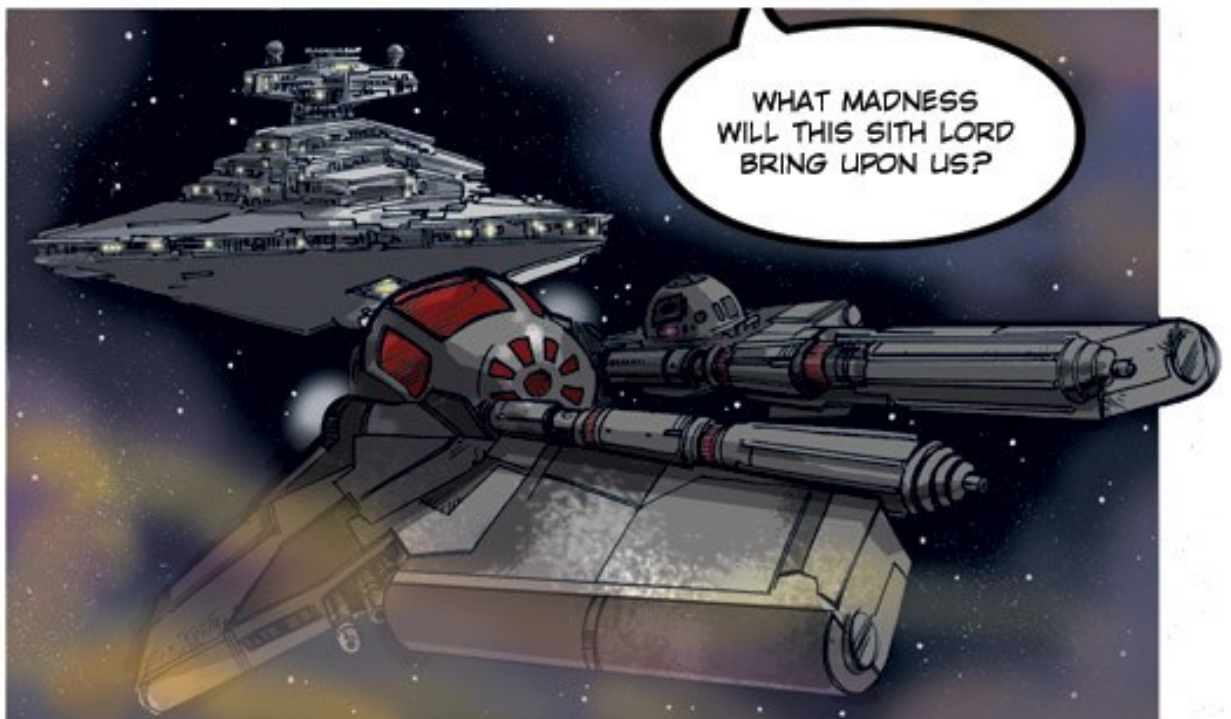
LIMITED,
OUR OPTIONS
ARE.



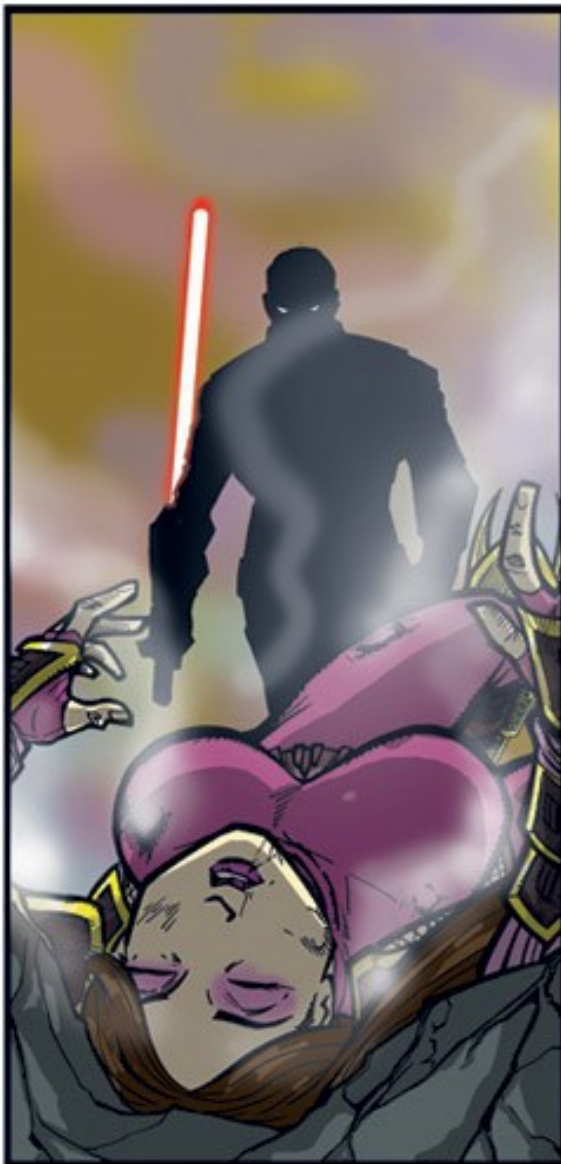
NOT AS I SEE IT...
WHILE OTHERS, WITHOUT
VISION, CLING TO CRUDE
MATTER, WE ARE LUMINOUS
BEINGS. LET THOSE CLOUDED
BY DARKNESS SET FOOT IN
THE FIRE TO SEE HOW
IT BURNS.

I...
I CAN SHOW
YOU ANOTHER
WAY.













CAPTAIN
ECLIPSE. WHERE IS
MY APPRENTICE?




LORD VADER, HE
LOST CONSCIOUSNESS
WHEN WE WERE FORCED
TO PUT DOWN HERE.



HE SEEMED AGITATED
AND LEFT TO THE NORTH. I'M
AFRAID HE LEFT NO INDICATION OF
WHERE HE WENT OR WHY.

NO.



NO, OF COURSE HE DID
NOT. FOR YOU WOULD
NOT BE ABLE
TO SEE.



YOU
ARE BLIND
TO THE
FORCE.

YES, MY
LORD.





THROUGH
THE FORCE, YOU WILL
SEE OTHER WORLDS. THE
FUTURE. THE PAST.
AND TIMES BEYOND
OUR OWN.

AND HERE
THE IMBALANCE LIES.



I HAVE
BUT ONLY WHAT
I TOOK WITH ME,
BUT THAT IS ALL I
NEED.



FOR
MY ALLY...

IS THE
FORCE!

Comments by Imperial Trooper Kosk

"The Plex is lightweight, a nice change from other systems. But it can't take rough handling or the targeting system falls apart. Oh, you can fix it all right with regular maintenance tools, but that takes about an hour. And there's no time for that if you're in the middle of action.

"You can override a broken targeting system and fire it anyway, but there's no guarantee you'll hit anything. If you fire a rocket, you're all right — that's line of sight. But if it's a GAM, one or the other of the tracking systems kicks in and there's no telling which.

"A small problem for careless troopers is the firing stud. You have to tap it twice — once to set the guidance system and a second time to fire. I've seen troopers in a hurry press it only once, then wonder why the missile didn't fire.

"Aside from those things, a Plex-fired GAM is the best seek-and-destroy weapon I've seen for use against repulsorcraft. It's fast, and almost impossible to shake once it locks onto a target. I admit the GAM's visual tracking system can be confused by other images in the sky. Good evasive maneuvers can lose the missile, too. But once it's caught a repulsor signature, that craft is gone."

"The time you spend at this Academy is the longest period of officer training in the Empire. At the end of 30 months of rigorous physical and academic training, you will receive a commission as a lieutenant in the Imperial Navy. You will know more than your peers, and have greater responsibilities than your peers. If you perform your duties well, they will not remain your equals for long. Officers from this Academy — and only this Academy — are recognized as the very best the Emperor has to command.

"You will serve the Emperor best by mastering everything you have come here to learn: the behavior and standards expected of an officer of the Imperial Navy. If you are selected for flight school, you have even more demanding training ahead after your graduation. You are expected to complete it with the same degree of excellence you will show in your Academy studies.

"Our credo is 'Service. Fealty. Fidelity.' This may be the first time you have heard it. By the time you graduate, it is one you will never forget."

— Excerpt from Academy cadet indoctrination speech delivered by Fleet Admiral Holt.

Comments on the DEMP Gun from Imperial Trooper Dokus

"We were on Tatooine during a routine shakedown. In one place out in the desert, some moisture farmer's work droids wouldn't let us in to search his evaporation station. Our senior officer didn't take that too well. The droids wouldn't move aside, so he turned to me — I'm the DEMP gunner — and told me to juice 'em.

"The first setting ionizes a droid's systems. It sparks a bit, but the droid can operate normally in a moment. We never use that setting. If you need to stop a droid, that doesn't put him out of the action. It only makes him pause for a bit.

"The second setting's more useful. It stuns a droid, like a blaster set on stun does to a Human. Knocks 'em out for quite some time — long enough to do whatever we came for.

"The third setting is the fun one. It blows 'em completely. Not only does it short their power plant, but it gets the motivator and usually burns the memory too. It's supposed to be used to stun heavily-armored droids, and stop ones that are obviously threatening.

"Well, I felt so threatened by those work droids I set the DEMP on 'fry' and let them have it. It stopped them, all right, and something burned out so badly in one it actually caught fire.

"I'd never seen that happen before. A burning droid is pretty spectacular, I found out."

Comments on the CSPL from Lt. Harburjk

"The Caspel has a bad reputation in certain circles, but only among troops that don't keep their weapons clean. They claim that it jams and ignites the canister while it's in the launcher.

True, that's happened once or twice. The most notorious time was the accident that killed Imperial General Azarin on Lafra. But the investigation proved it was a trooper's negligence, not his weapon, that was at fault.

"No, the Caspel isn't such a sensitive piece of equipment. Just watch out for dirt caught around the canister priming pin, and make sure it's kept clean. That's what can cause the launcher to jam. Then, sure, the canister's been primed and it'll go off if it's jarred.

"Basically, though, the weapon is simple and reliable. It's not as flashy as a blaster, but it fills a big need in small unit tactics. And the Caspel doesn't have as many quirks as other projectile launchers I've seen. It seems like it takes forever to affix the grenade adapter, but it always feels that way when you need grenade fire quick. Of course, when a fire team takes a Caspel on a mission, you have to plan smoke or chemical support ahead of time. It takes only the special canisters designed for it, and standard-issue grenades — nothing else. So if you didn't bring the CSPL load you need, you can't substitute ammo from other weapons."

Comments on the E-Web by Imperial Trooper Reydon

"The E-Web's a good gun, but it's not built to be fired by one man. Oh, you can do it. But you'll wish you could do it better.

"That happened to me when we were at Keskin. We fell back after our last firefight and took up a position outside of town. Ohvan and I set up the E-Web and settled in for the night. We were waiting for our scouts to report back, until a nightfire went off and lit us up. Ohvan was hit and fell against the Eksoan. I dived for the power unit to keep it from tumbling down the hill. That power pack is heavy, and if it goes, it rips the power couplers out with it.

"A few shots winged the E-Web, but couldn't knock it out. The Rebels ran past and saw me down over the power pack. They thought I was hit, and kept going. The other E-Web, somewhere off to my right, exploded a minute later. It's real dangerous when the cryocooler gets hit. Rebels were pouring out of the jungle by the time I got the power couplings straightened out and opened fire.

"Without a second man it's very hard to shoot an E-Web. There's no fire control, you can't nurse your power supply or watch the cooler, and the gun is awkward to aim. My shooting accuracy was cut in half, and I barely took out enough Rebels to chase 'em under cover.

"I never want to try to fire an E-Web by myself again if I can help it. Especially not in a firefight."

2 bby

Formal Declaration of Rebellion

Shortly after the signing of the Corellian Treaty, Mon Mothma decided that it was time to make clear to the galaxy the political objectives of the Rebellion. Until this time, Imperial propagandists had been having good success portraying the Rebels as "pirates, criminals, and anarchists, intent on overthrowing the Empire for personal gain." Issuing the "Declaration of Rebellion," Mothma wanted to set the record straight for all time.

The Declaration of Rebellion was written by Mothma herself and addressed directly to the Emperor. Millions of holo-copies of the document were made and distributed by the Alliance's growing intelligence network. Within days, the Declaration could be found on virtually every planet in the Empire. Its effect was everything that the Alliance could have hoped for -- and more.

Soon after the Declaration was distributed, several systems openly declared their allegiance to the Alliance. This was valiant, but foolish -- Mothma attempted to stop them but it was too late. Imperial response was swift and harsh, and within weeks all "Secession Worlds" were suppressed. However, in their few weeks of freedom, the planets were able to transfer much of their weaponry, resources and manpower offworld, into the hands of the Alliance.

The Imperial Propaganda Bureau immediately went to work to discredit the Declaration, but if anything, their wild tales of "blatant terrorism" and "anti-establishment insurgency" merely served to fuel the fire. Many people of the galaxy had become acutely aware of, and generally sympathetic to, the Rebel Alliance, and there was nothing the Empire could do about it.

We, the beings of the Rebel Alliance, do this day send forth this Declaration to His Majesty, the Emperor, and to all sentient beings in the galaxy, to make clear to all the Purposes and Goals of this Rebellion.

We firmly acknowledge the importance and necessity of the institution of Galactic Government. We accept that all must subjugate themselves to that Government, giving up certain rights and freedoms, in return for

peace, prosperity and happiness for all.

We believe that the Galactic Government derives its power and right to rule from the consent of the governed. We believe that, should the rights of free beings be willfully and malignantly usurped, it is the unalienable right of said beings to alter or abolish said Government.

We believe that the Galactic Empire has willfully and malignantly usurped the rights of the free beings of the galaxy and therefore, it is our unalienable right to abolish it from the galaxy.

We do not take this course lightly. Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes, but when a Government displays a history of usurpation, abuse and moral atrocity, displaying a clear design to subjugate totally and absolutely beings born free under the auspices of nature, it is our right -- our duty -- to depose that Government.

The history of the present Galactic Empire is of repeated injuries upon its members, with the direct objective of establishing you, Emperor Palpatine, as absolute tyrant over the galaxy:

You have disbanded the Senate, the voice of the people;

You have instituted a policy of blatant racism and genocide against the non-human peoples of the galaxy;

You have overthrown the chosen rulers of planets, replacing them with Moffs and governors of your choice;

You have raised taxes without the consent of those taxed;

You have murdered and imprisoned millions without benefit of trial;

You have unlawfully taken land and property;

You have expanded the military far beyond what is necessary and prudent, for the sole purpose of oppressing your subjects.

We, the Rebel Alliance, do, therefore, in the name -- and by the authority -- of the free beings of the galaxy, solemnly publish and declare our intentions:

To fight and oppose you and your forces, by any and all means at our disposal;

To refuse any Imperial law contrary to the rights of free beings;

To bring about your destruction and the destruction of the Galactic Empire;

To make forever free all beings in the galaxy.

To these ends, we pledge our property, our honor and our lives.

Holding a planet doesn't just introduce the possibility that you will lose it. It begins the countdown.

—Memoirs of Mon Mothma

Arkanian Dawn

The control cabin of a Y164 Thalassian slave transport is generally not a nice place. The cockpit of the *Arkanian Dawn* was particularly unappealing, littered with the detritus of too many long watches spent with too little to do, on a ship powered solely by greed and the misery of others. The floor was mired in a layer of food wrappers and miscellaneous shreds of plastic. The vessel's cockpit shelves were littered with cans and bottles and half a sabacc deck, the remainder of which had fallen down a gap behind one of the dented consoles.

The view outside of the gloomy planetoid Dalastine IV complimented the interior perfectly, thought Thila sourly. Overhead, three pairs of red lights moving in formation sped northward — Skipray blastboats operating from the Rebel base located on Dalastine. Thila slumped in the co-pilot's seat, nursing several canisters of Sullustan ale.

Corwin paused at the door, looked around at the mess, shrugged and went over to the pilot's seat. "I never thought I'd be on one of these on friendly terms," he said, sitting down. "Life takes strange twists sometimes."

Thila allowed the silence to stretch on for a few moments. Then she took a can, opened it and passed a second can to Corwin. After taking a sip, she said, "You wanted to talk to me, Commander Shelvay." It wasn't a question.

"*Arkanian Dawn*. Good name for a ship, that. It triggered a memory." Corwin took a swig of the ale. "How long does it take to get used to a disguise like that?"

"What?!" Thila paused, taken aback. Then she took a deep breath and released it slowly. "A long time. Years. *Too many years*." She looked slowly at the mess in the cockpit, and a flicker of a wry smile appeared on her lips. "It's part of me now. I never used to be this untidy."

Corwin smiled gently. "I thought about doing something of the sort," he said, leaning back. "Though, I suppose I did. There can't be more than three people who know the old Corwin Shelvay, and they probably wouldn't recognize me now." He took a drink from the can again, making a pause. "I wonder if anyone remembers Dawn Arkanian."

Thila looked down for a moment, and rubbed her face with her hands. When she looked up, the hard-lined features of a Sullustan slaver were almost gone. Now the resemblance to her brother was more apparent. But Thila also looked careworn and tired.

"I do. But not very well." She gave a dry chuckle, with little humor in it. "I often wondered if naming my ship after my old self was a good idea." Then she fell silent again, as more memories began to return.

Corwin nodded, leaning forward again. "You're safe. I only knew you because of an old friend of mine." Corwin stared into his ale can, his voice trailing off sadly. "A very good friend." After a moment he rubbed his eyes, balanced the can on the console. "That friend of mine was calling himself Dimitri Melamor, and he was my tutor at college. That wasn't his real name. His real name was Darrin Arkanian, which he told me shortly

before he helped me make this."

Corwin lifted his lightsaber briefly in one hand and looked down at it, silently remembering.

"Yes ... I guessed you were his ... pupil as soon as I heard your full name. I ... had a few letters from him over the years ... Through letter drops and the like." Thila looked up at Corwin and continued, "He spoke well of you." There was a catch in her voice as she added, "What happened all those years ago?"

Corwin looked up. She could sense his answer already, he could tell. "We were travelling. I saw a lot on that trip — I was a lot younger ... then. I learned a lot about life, about the realities of the damned Empire. Bepin, Kessel, Tatooine, we even made a stop on Coruscant."

He looked away, out at the gloomy landscape, and sighed. "We tried to keep quiet, but they found us. I was captured." He drained the can, then quietly and precisely squashed it.

"They turned me over to Tremayne; Darrin came after me." Corwin's face was blank, as though all emotion had retreated below the shell. After a moment he blinked, and expression returned. It was one of grief and sadness and loss. "He told me to run, gave me a name and some cash. I disobeyed him, even fought with Tremayne ... but I wasn't in time." He dropped the flattened disc on the console and reached for another can, but didn't open it. "Tremayne killed him," he finished quietly.

"Looking back on it, I think he knew how it was going to go. He marched into it as if he thought he had no choice ... as if he knew he was supposed to save me no matter what it cost him."

Thila nodded once, with tears brimming in her eyes. "Yes," she said, simply. Then she gave up the uneven struggle and sat with tears coursing down her face. She seemed in a kind of equilibrium state, not sobbing, but with tears flowing freely.

Corwin sat silently, not moving, with the quiet, sad expression of someone whose tears have all been shed long since. After a while there was the sharp hiss of a can being opened, but no movement to drink.

"I've known for a long while, really," Thila said, in the tight, pain-filled voice of someone crying. "but I needed to be told. Thank you." She sobbed once. Then she put her head in her hands and started to quake silently.

Corwin put down the can, and moved to put an arm about her shoulders, wondering why he felt nothing beyond regret. Then he felt his master's presence suddenly, very strongly. He breathed a silent greeting to the shade (real or imagined, he didn't care). He picked up the ale with his free hand, and sat with the two of them for company, gazing out at the surface of Dalastine.

It was some days later when Corwin saw her again. Or rather, he failed to see Thila. The slaver working for the Rebellion seemed to have fallen away and Dawn Arkanian had finally stepped out of the disguise that she had worn for years. When she saw Corwin, she smiled, and he realized that perhaps he had not been alone in feeling the presence of Darrin Arkanian, Jedi Knight.

Recruitment Speech

The old mansion house, called "Dovecote" according to the faded wooden sign, was perched on the edge of Koved City, about half an hour from Siluria III's main spaceport. Most of the neighboring houses were boarded up, abandoned when the Empire moved in. The house's owner, Kaiya Adrimetrum, sat on a supply crate and looked sadly out across the city, watching the sunrise. There was activity in the house, her daughters preparing food, and patients in the make-shift infirmary moaning from their wounds. And the mysterious figure of Corwin Shelvay moved in and out of the periphery of Kaiya's awareness.

Kaiya stared out across the garden for a while. Corwin Shelvay went to pick up a couple of mugs from the autochef, and sat down opposite, handing her a drink.

"Good op," he said mildly.

Kaiya looked up. "Yes. It was." Her voice was clipped, in control. In her eyes was a memory of the firefight, the smoke, the flying blaster bolts, the excitement of blasting those Imperial toy soldiers to hell and gone. Her face hardened. "We didn't find Governor Quannith's body, though."

"The house was coming apart at the seams. Good thing, I guess, or we'd have had more trouble with the Imperials." Corwin took another sip of tea and removed his hat, brushed dust from the crown. He looked slightly saddened. "We had pretty light casualties considering we faced down two squads of stormtroopers," he added with a glance at the infirmary room.

"Fourteen injured is *light*?" Kaiya was amazed at this statement. Fourteen injured seemed terribly high to her. Especially fourteen of *her people*.

"Fourteen injured is light," Corwin affirmed. "Especially against crack Imperial stormtroopers dug in tight in a house. It was the blaster cannon that did it, and Wince with the rifle, I suspect. Open ground would have given us fourteen dead." He looked down for a while, perhaps at a memory. "Rule number one: never underestimate stormtroopers. They're only stupid when their commanders are stupid, but give them a straight tactical situation and they become very, very dangerous." He shook his head, looked up at Kaiya again. "What the hell did Governor Quannith *do* to you anyway?" Corwin couldn't shake the memory of the evening's battle, of the ferocity of the quiet woman before him.

"He ... I don't want to talk about it." Kaiya looked away, as if suppressing a painful memory.

Corwin wondered briefly what the memory could be, then remembered the house where Kaiya lived. Alone, but with a room and personal effects for three or more ... family. Her daughters were here. But no husband.

He looked down, one hand moving to the curious cylinder hanging from his belt. His eyes flicked up to

Kaiya's face, then he turned his head to look out of the window. He said softly, "Yeah, I know."

After a couple of seconds, he sighed and shrugged, working a little tension out of his back. Despite the hectic battle, he didn't seem to be physically tired at all. He looked back at Kaiya. "So what's your next move?"

Kaiya stopped picking splinters. She looked up at Corwin, her expression hardening again. "We make sure," she said, "that we finished the job."

"How long do you plan to spend doing that? The Imperial base on Siluria Three will know about you by now. You have a war on your hands."

"Not a war, surely. The Empire won't..." She stopped short. Perhaps for the first time since Corwin had met her, he could see her thinking hard about all the consequences attending the local Imperial Governor's death. A few more seconds passed in which time Corwin heard the others moving about in the kitchen of the old house preparing an evening meal. Seconds stretched to a minute or more before Kaiya looked up.

"We'll have to become guerillas. We'll all be hunted." She paused, her face tightening as further implications sank in. "I haven't the resources for this. We'll need more money, more safe houses, equipment, medical supplies ..." She dropped her head into her hands. "These people were my friends. What have I done?"

Corwin watched her a moment.

"My Master once told me about a warrior race," he said. "They were a careful, considerate people, which was unusual for the type. They had a religion, a belief concerning their commanders. They believed that the commander carried the soul of every warrior under him. It meant that for a man to place himself under a leader was an act of pure selflessness. It also made the officers very devoted to their soldiers. The commander bled with every one of his men and women — he felt them die. But their souls remained with their commander. To the end." He paused, added gently, "No soldier of theirs ever died in vain."

"I *conned* them into following me," Kaiya exploded angrily. "I can see that now." Kaiya raised her head and glared at Corwin, suddenly suspicious. She hardly knew this man, and somehow she'd let him in on her most audacious scheme. Who is this man, she thought. "What's your interest, precisely, friend? Are you some sort of galactic crusader? I'm being led in this conversation. *Where?*"

Corwin smiled wryly. "To be honest, yes. I am some sort of galactic crusader. Also, I think we should get you guys off-planet. The Rebellion could use you."

"You're *joking*! What would the Rebels want with us? If you *are* a Rebel," she added quickly, her hand moving slightly toward the cut-down blaster rifle on a nearby

crate. *If he's an informer, he's meat*, she thought darkly.

Corwin shrugged, sensing Kaiya's agitation. "One," he said, enumerating points on his fingers, hoping he could reason with her. "You had enough leadership to gather a group of people. Two, you managed to get enough money together to buy four blaster cannons *and* get them transported. Three, you did this and organized an attack and safe houses without the Imperials knowing. Four, you carried off a successful attack. That makes you very, very good officer material. You've got some good shots and medics on your team, and more people with other skills who can learn more. The Rebellion always needs people like you." Corwin paused, grinning.

"And twenty-five thousand credits of Imperial bounty says that I'm not a Rebel, I'm doing something seriously wrong." Corwin smiled faintly.

"Twenty-five thousand? Who are you?"

"Twenty-five is the standard bounty for anyone caught with one of these." Corwin unhooked the odd cylinder from his belt and held it out. Kaiya stared at the device without a flicker of recognition. Cautiously, she took it and turned it over in her hand, taking care not to touch any of the control studs.

"What is it?"

Corwin took it back and turned the end outwards with a practiced flick, touching one of the controls. A meter-long beam of brilliant light extended, sending shadows skittering away behind the crates. It made a slight humming noise, louder as he looped the end through a figure of eight so fast that the startling afterimage had not faded by the time it was complete. The number hung there on the retina, slowly fading.

"A lightsaber," Kaiya breathed. "I've heard of them, but never actually seen one. So you're a Jedi? I thought you all were supposed to be bearded, wrinkled old men communing with the Force or something." Corwin flicked the saber off, smiling. The humming stopped. Kaiya paused for a breath.

"Not all of us. Look, I can get you in touch with the Alliance, and give you a good reference." He hung the lightsaber back on his belt. "Face it, you can't do much to the Empire here, and you're good enough to make a difference. What do you say?"

Kaiya got up abruptly, and walked back over to the window, rubbing her eyes. "I can't believe this. A Jedi Knight, asking me to work for the Rebellion. And I'm still not sure I can accept." She paused, sighed deeply and turned back to face Corwin. Fatigue was plain in her face. "I had planned to stay on Siluria to fight the Imperials," she continued. "I don't want to leave this place, or my friends. And I don't believe I have to." She fell silent.

"If you stay here, you're hitting at empty air. This place isn't important to the Empire. If you *do* manage to make yourself a serious nuisance, they'll just whistle up a couple of TIE bombers and blow you apart from orbit, and they won't care *who* they kill as long as they finish you." Corwin drained his tea. "The Empire also has a tactic used on worlds it doesn't much need. They start killing the innocent population. It's the oldest anti-guerilla trick in the book: burn someone in the town square at midday every day until they surrender.

"Kaiya, you'll be a good commander, but you'll be wasted here. If you want the Empire off Siluria, you'll have to fight it off Siluria. You'll do more damage, and the people here will be safer. And you don't have to leave everyone behind. We'll try and get as many people as want to come out of here. If Siluria needs you, it needs you out there, hitting them where it counts."

"It's that easy, is it? Just fly off, join the Rebellion and all will be well?" Kaiya ran one hand through her hair, distractedly. "I don't think the universe works like that."

"Nothing worth doing is easy. You *will* do more damage to the Empire with the Rebellion, though. You've levelled a Governor's house, Kaiya. Now imagine doing the same thing to a line communications bunker or a reactor house. Not much, but doing it two minutes before a Rebel SpecForce unit hits the base. It can definitely give the Empire a bloody nose. Or worse. Siluria will be safe from any reprisals, too, because they won't know who you are." Corwin stood up, stuck his hands in his pockets.

"It will be rough on you, and all of you who decide to come. I won't lie to you. A lot of people get killed every day. It may be a while before I can find someone to contact, since security's run very tight. But plans are best left flexible: the need is there, the means are there, and you have the talent to make a mark. Trust the Force for the rest."

There was further clattering from the kitchen, and the door opened. A young girl, maybe ten or eleven years old, came in, bearing two steaming plates. "You two have been talking for ages," she smiled. "I thought you'd be hungry."

Kaiya smiled slightly, and took one plate from the girl, her daughter. Then she sat down to eat, facing away from Corwin. It appeared the conversation was over. Corwin looked at her back for a few moments, then took the other plate. "I could eat a Bantha," he said. "Thanks." Then he put his hat back on, and left Kaiya to her thoughts.



Double Vision

Han Solo met the Tonnika twins in his dealings with Jabba the Hutt. The young women intrigued him, but he made sure to stay clear of anything they were involved in. After all, he took enough gambles in life without going up against Brea and Senni. The sabacc cards always fell their way, if you understand the meaning.

But Solo did enjoy their company — in limited doses and with one hand on his credit belt. During one of his visits with the sisters, they got to talking about gambling. And no discussion of gambling was complete, as far as Han was concerned, if it didn't include some mention of his erstwhile friend, Lando Calrissian. The tales about Calrissian got Han to remember a number of tricks the old scoundrel had played on him, and an idea formed. *Why not let the girls play a scam on Lando?* he thought. Brea and Senni smiled in agreement.

Now, Lando Calrissian is a bit of a con man himself, a gambler, a rogue. The Tonnika sisters saw in him a true challenge. If they could pull a scam on him, they would feel confident about dealing with almost anyone. So Han arranged a "chance" meeting between Bresenni (the name the girls go by when they pretend to be just one person) and Lando, then took off before he could get in any trouble.

Lando Calrissian, never one to turn his back on a beautiful lady, turned on all the charm he could muster when Bresenni quite literally fell into his lap at The High Stakes Casino on Balfron. From then on, the two were inseparable, spending every moment together. They danced through the zero-g clubs, dined at the most exotic restaurants, and played at the busiest gambling halls. For Lando, who usually did the charming, Bresenni was a perfect companion, exhibiting traits that were completely compatible with his own tastes and habits. But then things began to change. One moment Bresenni was all smiles and cheerfulness, the next she was angry and snap-

pish, almost as though she were two different people who just happened to look the same and share the same memories. After a standard month of these personality shifts, Calrissian was ready to go crazy. He thought he was falling in love with her, while part of him couldn't stand her!

Torn between her mood swings, which sometimes shifted in the middle of a conversation, Lando nonetheless decided that he needed the young woman in his life. He decided to suggest something more permanent over the course of a special evening. His suit was well tailored, the Sullustan wine chilled to a perfect temperature, the Ithorian roses were just the right shade of blue. Mustering his nerve, Lando boldly knocked upon

Bresenni's hotel door and stepped inside. The night got off to a grand start as Calrissian decided he was devastatingly charming — even for him. But then, as he was ready to "make the deal" as it were, her exact double emerged from the back room. Smiling a maliciously sensual smile, she handed Lando a holodisk.

Snapping the disk into the room's holoprojector, Lando was quite distressed to see the grinning image of Han Solo appear. "Hope you had a grand time, Lando old friend. Isn't it amazing how similar they look? But there are differences, as I'm sure you discovered."

The image snapped off but Solo's laugh lingered in Lando's ears. A dark cloud passed over Calrissian's features, but then his face softened and a smile broke out.

"Good one, Han, you old pirate," he laughed, "good one!" Inside, Lando thought to himself, *He's got a lot of nerve for that stunt. Someday, I'll have to even the score...*



Who Says Pirates Don't Have a Sense of Humor?

The freighter *Last Legs* was a dilapidated old *Maso*-class light cargo hauler that had definitely seen better days. *Too bad*, the freighter's captain thought, *today sure ain't one of 'em*.

"Sorry about that, crew," he spoke into the ship's intercom. "The ship's hyperdrive cutout activated in the middle of our jump. Navigator Sellbo to the cockpit please." The captain, an experienced spacer with thousands of hours of flight time logged, turned to stare at the front view screen — and saw an absolutely gigantic letter "H."

"What the blazes is *that*?" Navigator Sellbo had arrived. "Our hyperdrive cutout activated, and dropped us in front of a giant 'H'? What's going on?"

"There's not just an 'H', you know," the captain replied. Sellbo was a good navigator, but he needed some serious salting. "There's an 'A' next to it. And an 'R'. And if you really crane your neck, just off into the

distance, you can see an 'M—Z—U—A—Y.' They're pulling us inside with a tractor beam." A sudden thought struck the captain. He began to laugh. Loudly.

Navigator Sellbo looked sharply at the captain. He had never seen the grizzled old smuggler do anything but scowl. "Uh ... captain? You okay?"

"*Harmzuay!*" the captain howled, slapping his knee. "Don't you get it? HA!"

The *Last Legs* settled into the pirate vessel's docking bay, and the *clank* of magnetic clamps securing the ship echoed eerily in the cockpit. The captain was still laughing.

Navigator Sellbo stared at the captain for a moment, and suddenly understood what was so funny. "Oh, I get it. *Harmzuay*. Harm's way. We're in 'harm's way.'" The navigator grinned, too. "At least these pirates have a sense of humor."

Passages

Distant voices accosted the edges of his subconscious -- voice droning lowly in a language he'd heard before but had never bothered to learn. Struggling to raise his head from the table, Matt Turhaya rubbed eyes glazed from drinking one too many ales. His head ached.

Music drifted across the room, the boom-boom of a KeyBed's bass notes accentuating voices that grew in intensity as Matt returned from his semi-conscious state. Focusing on his surroundings, he finally remembered where he was. *The cantina*.

Halfway across the room at the bar, a lively argument was under way. Matt recognized the Wookiee. But he'd never seen the huge alien's adversary in the cantina before. On further reflection, he couldn't recall ever seeing anyone like her. Her head was completely bald except for one long silver braid which hung loosely, falling well below her waist. She'd entwined within it a silky black tie, which did add an air of elegance to her appearance, an appearance which perhaps only the males of her species might find attractive.

Speaking in the Wook's native tongue, she stared him down with eyes that met his -- she was only a centimeter or so shorter than he. Long, slender fingers

poked rapidly into the Wookiee's hairy chest like a barrage of artillery fire. She was either stupid, or very brave, Matt decided as he wiped a hand across his scruffy face.

Matt noticed that other customers in the cantina had given them a wide berth. Her hand rested lightly on the DL-44 holstered at her waist. She turned her head slightly toward the bartender. Light illuminated her pasty-gray skin and for the first time, Matt could see the jagged scar that tore across her face just below her right eye.

The Wookiee barked at the female. She growled a heated reply, then looked around the room. Her pink eyes met Matt's. Her scowl vanished and the two stamen-like antennae atop her head twitched. Matt held her gaze. Everything in the room seemed to stop, frozen in time and space. Her eyes filled with pain -- *his* pain -- not the looks of pity or disgust he'd gotten from others a hundred times before. Something seemed to bind them together, as if they were of one mind. And somehow, though they didn't even know each other, he could tell she understood him more than anyone else ever would.

She spun back to face the Wookiee, barking another retort. His blue eyes widened, then he roared with laughter. She smiled, slapping him across the back. Everyone within earshot visibly relaxed.

Matt watched her for a few seconds more, unable to take his eyes off her. Trembling, he took a deep breath, then reached for the glass on the table. Empty. He eyed it, twisting the container in his hand and watching the light reflect a prism of colors, wondering if he ever again might marvel at little miracles. Wondering if he ever might care about anyone, or anything, again. For a heartbeat or two he was lost in another time, another place, when suddenly a familiar voice boomed across the room. Placing the glass down on the table, Matt cradled his head in his hands.

"All right. Where is he?" Even with the band playing in the background, Jamie Turhaya's melodic baritone voice carried above the steady drone of conversation in the cantina. "Where's my brother?" he called.

The blond-headed, deeply-tanned man cut a handsome figure compared to most of the cantina's usual patrons. A strong jaw line and high cheekbones highlighted his face. He was taller than his younger brother, his frame more muscular. Jamie spied Matt, then picked his way past a half dozen tables.

"C'mon, Mattie," he said. "Time to go home. Tomorrow's gonna be a busy day at the shop. You need a good night's rest so you'll be able to help out."

Grumbling, Matt draped his arm across Jamie's shoulders and willingly let his older brother drag him home. He tried not to listen to words he'd heard before.

"You know, Matt, you've been here for six months. You can't keep doing this to yourself," Jamie said, his tone not meant to be condescending.

Matt knew Jamie loved him dearly. He'd put up with Matt's drunkenness, nursed him through his melancholy, and refused to give up on him no matter what others had said.

"I know you've been through a lot," Jamie continued, "losin' Anii and Alex within a year of each other -- it's a terrible burden. But, Matt, you've got to get on with your life..."

* * *

Rubble. As far as the eye could see. Not one house stood on what once were the rolling green-covered hillsides of Janara III. A brownish haze blanketed the ruins. Smoke drifted toward a darkening sky.

Matt fell to his knees among the ruins of his family's home. He sifted through broken pieces of his life -- plasteel from the table, a piece of pottery from a treasured vase, broken dishes. He grew excited when he found part of a marble holoframe his wife had given her parents. Using both hands, he combed through the dirt and found -- burnt, half-shredded, with edges curled -- a holo of Anii with Alex. It was the only piece of his wife and young daughter that he had left.

Trembling, he looked up, holding the holo close to chest. A figure far off on the horizon caught his eye -- a ghostly shadow surveying the land -- the white armor of an Imperial stormtrooper. The Empire he once served was responsible for this destruction.

Tears streamed down his face. "No!" he shouted. A cold unforgiving wind moaned, carrying his voice across the scarred landscape. Curling up into a ball on the ground, Matt gripped the holo tightly as the sun said its good-byes to the city of Sreina...

Peeking its fiery orange head over the horizon, one of the twin suns announced another hot and dry day on Tatooine. Sunlight streamed through a crack in the partially closed shades. As the sun drifted higher, a flood of light streaked across the sofa into Matt's face. Waking suddenly, startled by the glare in his eyes, he sat up abruptly as the nightmare fled his senses.

Jamie snored noisily in the back of the house. Matt fell back on the sofa where he'd slept off most of the effects of his visit to the cantina. His head no longer ached, but he felt numb, emotionally drained. For a long time he just lay there listening to the monotonous hum of the climate control generator. Finally he got up, dressed quietly, then slipped outside into the streets of Mos Eisley.

Cutting through a shadowy alley across the street from his brother's store, Matt passed a still-darkened Heff's Souvenir shop. For a town that rarely slept, Mos Eisley seemed unusually quiet this morning. Even the street corner preacher hadn't taken up his post yet.

Inside the entrance to the cantina, Matt let his eyes drift slowly around the room.

"Back again so soon, Matt?" Jaresh, one of the regulars, called to him from the bar.

Matt nodded to the crusty old man and ambled down the stairs to join him for a drink. But something at the far end of the room caught his eye. The female humanoid was there, immersed in a game of sabacc, gently tapping her fingers across the table.

Her gaze shifted around the sabacc table, her antennae twitching almost imperceptibly. Cha'ba, a Twi'lek "businessman," as he referred to himself, tinkered with his credits. Pira Bland, a Chandrilan spice runner, picked up his mug and took a swig of ale. And the Corellian smuggler to the female's right leaned back casually in his chair, cupping his hands behind his head. He acknowledged Matt's approach with a tilt of his head.

"Bets," the dealer called.

"I'm in for 20," the alien female said, tossing her credits into the pot.

"Twenty. Plus another 20," Bland replied.

Cha'ba shook his head. "*Do chonda*," he said, placing his cards face down on the table.

The Corellian straightened in his seat, picking his cards up from the table to study them. He looked from Bland to the female humanoid. Grinning at her, he said, "All right, Metallo, I want to see what you've got. Here's my credits."

Card values materialized as the dealer pushed the randomizer. Bland rolled his eyes. The Corellian shook his head as Metallo laid her winning hand face up and reached for the sabacc pot. "I don't know how you do it, Metallo," he mused, tossing his cards across the table. "Do all Riilebs have this natural talent for games of chance?"

A sly smile cracked her face. "We have no games like this on Riileb," she replied. "My former master taught me how to play."

"Is that how you got the scar on your face?" he quipped.

Matt saw the brief wave of pain that washed across Metallo's face. The Corellian saw it, too, and his grin disappeared.

Metallo slowly ran her finger along the three centimeter scar. Her voice lowered, almost to a whisper, as she glanced from face to face around the table. "The Empire did this," she said. There was a hint of bitterness in her voice. Her eyes came to rest on Matt and for one brief moment she seemed to look right through him. "I know I'm not the only one who has felt their wrath."

All heads nodded slowly in unison. Only the sound of shuffling feet padding across the cantina's weathered floor interrupted their thoughts. A Wookiee approached the table and growled at the Corellian.

"The ship's all loaded?" he asked.

The Wookiee barked an excited reply.

"Okay, great. I'll be there in a minute." The Corellian stood slowly, flashing Metallo a cockeyed grin. "Well, Metallo, what can I say? This game's too rich for me!"

"Good you quit now, you old pirate!" she laughed good-naturedly. "Before I take all your credits!"

"Yeah, right," he said, turning to leave.

"Clear skies, my friend," Metallo called to him. Her pink eyes shifted back toward the remaining players. "Well, how about another round?"

Matt cleared his throat. "You have room for one more?" he asked.

Bland chuckled, gesturing Matt toward the seat just vacated by the Corellian. "Metallo takes anyone's credits -- even yours, Turhaya!"

Metallo looked up at Matt again. "Another Corellian?" she asked.

Matt was surprised. "How'd you know?"

"Your name -- Turhaya -- that's Old Corellian. If I remember correctly, it translates to 'bright star,' doesn't it?"

Matt smiled. "My father used to say it meant that the Turhaya family was destined to outshine all others." His face soured suddenly. His life these last three years had been anything but bright. A promising career in the Imperial Navy had been shattered by the death of his wife. Then less than a year later, his daughter had been killed during a raid against suspected Rebels on Janara III. Matt rubbed his hand across his forehead. "Can I get a drink?" he shouted toward the bar.

"Yes," Metallo called, "bring us some tea."

Matt frowned.

Metallo frowned back at him, her eyes locking onto his again. "I won't take credits from anyone playing drunk, Mr. Turhaya."

A smile tugged at the corner of Matt's mouth. "Deal," he said as a broad grin swept across Metallo's face.

* * *

"You did what!" Jamie Turhaya shouted, pulling the protective visor away from his face.

Matt cringed. He was glad the body of an XP-38 kept Jamie more than an arm's length away. He'd never seen such anger in his brother's face. "I wagered the landspeeder shop in a sabacc game," he repeated quietly.

"Matt, you had no right! It's my shop! You don't own a credit of it!" Jamie shook his head in disgust. "Good skies, Mattie, what were you thinking? I thought if I gave you a job ... oh, never mind. Just get out of here!"

"I'm sorry, Jamie," Matt said. "Sorry won't get my shop back, Matt -- "

Metallo, too curious to wait in the shop's well-kept office, stood at the entrance to the garage of Turhaya's Landspeeder Repair Shop. "Excuse me," she interrupted.

"Captain Metallo," Matt said, turning to face her. It was obvious from her expression that she'd heard most of their conversation. "I was just explaining- "

Metallo held her hand up to silence Matt. "You are Matt's brother?" she asked a wide-eyed Jamie.

"Yes," he replied. "I own this shop."

"So I heard, Mr. Turhaya." Metallo glared at Matt.

"Listen, Captain--"

"And Matt is not your partner in this business?"

"That's right, Captain," Jamie said. "Matt works for me, that's all." "So, Matt," Metallo frowned, "you still owe me 150,000 credits."

"150,000!" Jamie shouted. "Matt, are you crazy? Were you so Drunk--"

"Mr. Turhaya, please," Metallo said calmly. "Matt was not drunk. He's quite sober as you can see. Now tell me, is your brother a good mechanic?"

Jamie nodded. "When he puts his mind to it, he's the best."

Metallo studied Matt. "You know anything about starships, Matt?"

"He's good with ships," Jamie chimed in before Matt could answer.

"My freighter's in need of some repairs -- not 150,000 credits' worth -- and I have been looking for a co-pilot."

"Co-pilot?" Matt asked warily. "He can work off what he owes you," Jamie added. Metallo glanced from Matt to Jamie, then back to Matt. "The *Star Quest* is in docking bay 87. Meet me there in two hours," she told him as she turned to leave.

"He'll be there, Captain," Jamie called to her.

Matt sulked, glowering at Jamie.

"Maybe this is a good thing, Mattie," Jamie told his younger brother.

"I don't know, Jamie."

"I've got a feeling about her. I like her." Jamie grinned, then turned serious. "You know, this could be a new start for you, Matt. Working the space lanes -- you always did like that sort of thing. Just try to stay sober--"

"No lectures please," Matt grimaced.

"Matt, I'm just sorry," he paused, trying to find the right words, placing a hand on his brother's shoulder, "I couldn't help you put the past behind you."

A mist clouded Matt's eyes. Turning away, he swatted at tears that threatened to blur his vision. "It's not your fault, Jamie. It's something I'll always have to live with."

"Remembering them is one thing, Matt, but you can't hold on forever," Jamie said, choking back the lump in his throat. "You've got to learn to let go."

"It's so hard," Matt said, looking back toward his brother, no longer ashamed if Jamie saw the tears that trickled down his cheek. "You've never been in love before, have you, Jamie?"

"No, I haven't, Matt," he admitted. "But I know what Anii meant to you--"

"Do you really?" Matt's faced was racked with pain, his eyes burned with a passion, a rage that had become all too familiar to Jamie.

"Maybe I don't, Matt. But, don't you see? You're gettin' another chance," Jamie said, his own eyes now brimming with tears. "All I'm saying is, don't let yesterday's shadows cloud your tomorrows."

Matt nodded, though he really didn't believe he had the strength -- or the courage -- to let go of those old memories.

"You're a good man, Matt Turhaya." Jamie hugged him tightly. "You can make this work," he added quietly. "I know you can do it."

* * *

Drayhar's Cantina. Eponte Spaceport. Kabaira. One month later...

It was like a thousand other cantinas on a thousand other worlds. Dimly lit, smoke-filled and noisy, it was crowded with patrons from more than two dozen systems. Some sat huddled in corner booths plotting business transactions. A handful of music lovers sat near the stage mesmerized by the band's passionate rendition of the familiar *Ballad of Stars' End*. The lead vocalist's deeply rich bass voice melded in perfect harmony with his trio of backup singers from Wranag.

Matt leaned back in his seat, slowly nursing his glass of Zadarian brandy and wondering how he'd gotten himself mixed up with Captain Tere Metallo. She'd barely given him a moment on his own these last few weeks. Always driving him hard ... *fix this, do that* ... she reminded him of a drill sergeant he once knew.

Grimacing quietly to himself, Matt took a long sip of his brandy. Something made him glance toward the entrance of the cantina. There she was, hands planted firmly on hips, with a scowl that ran from ear flap to ear flap.

Matt folded his arms across his chest and stared up into her eyes as she approached the table.

"Loading will be completed in about two hours, Matt," she said. He nodded, waiting for her to comment about the half-empty glass on the table.

"The adjustment you made on the backup hyperdrive checks out 100 percent. You did a great job!"

"Ah, thanks," he replied, caught off guard by her compliment. "I'm gonna get in one last game of sabacc before we head out. Would you like to join me?"

"No. I think I'll just finish my drink and head back to the ship." "All right. But why don't you come over and meet my friends. A couple are free-traders, like us. The others are businessmen here. And since we'll be doin' lots of business on Eponte, these are people you need to know."

"Sure," he said, "if you think so."

"I do."

Four beings sat at the sabacc table in the back corner of the cantina. One, a middle-aged woman, was dressed in a silky-looking blue jumpsuit. Obviously one of the free-traders, she nodded as Metallo and Matt walked up to them. If she'd been hardened by life in the spacelanes, it certainly didn't show on her cherubic-looking face. She studied Matt as the Twi'lek on her right smoothed his flowing red robes. He frowned, his one good eye narrowed. The other two men were dressed in conservative gray suits -- Metallo's Kabairan business associates.

"Gentlebeings!" Metallo greeted them.

"It's about time you showed up, Metallo. We were ready to begin without you!" the older Kabairan said, running his hand through hair that was streaked with white.

"Hunter, you know I wouldn't leave Eponte without giving you the chance to win back all that you lost last night!"

"Who's your friend?" the female free-trader asked.

"Matt Turhaya of Tatooine, meet my friends -- Menise, from Dantooine," she said pointing toward the woman, "Branak, from Ryloth, and two of the locals, Treimar and Hunter."

"Turhaya? From Tatooine, eh?" Menise asked. "You wouldn't by any chance be related to the Turhayas from the Landspeeder Repair, now would you?"

Matt sighed. Lights years away from Tatooine, word had already spread about his big loss to Metallo. "That's my brother's shop," he nodded glumly.

Menise laughed so hard it brought tears to her eyes. "So, Matt, the story I heard last week in Mos Eisley is true?"

"What are you talking about, Menise?" Treimar asked.

Menise rubbed her eyes dry. "Metallo won Matt's services after he wagered his brother's business in a sabacc game. I don't know, Tere," she said, studying Matt from head to toe, "are you sure you got the best end of the deal?"

Metallo smiled. "I'm sure of it, my friends. Matt's a great mechanic, and a good co-pilot. He knows more about ships than all you fools put together."

"Fair enough," Menise said. "You must've impressed your boss, Matt. I didn't mean to give you a hard time."

"That's okay," he replied.

Hunter smiled up at Matt. "I bet that was the best game you ever lost, son."

Matt nodded, eyeing Metallo from the corner of his eye. "Yeah, you may be right."

"So, are you headed back to Tatooine?" Menise asked. "

"Not this trip," Matt said.

"Well, Matt, I think these gentlebeings," she waved her hand gracefully around the table, "would like a chance to empty my pockets."

"Yes," Branak grunted. "Have a seat, Metallo."

"How about you, Matt?" Hunter asked.

"No, I've got some work to do on the *Star Quest*."

"That can wait, Matt," Metallo told him.

"I don't have a credit on me," he said.

"That's okay, I've got enough for the two of us. You can pay me when we get back to the ship."

Matt studied Metallo's face. He didn't understand this Riileb female one bit. What did she mean, pay her back? With what? At their port stops she'd given him just enough credits for a drink or two. *Well*, he thought, *I already owe her a fortune, what's a few credits more?*

Two hours later, Metallo had won back nearly everything she'd lent him. Stretching, she glanced around the table. "Well, my friends, our ship awaits. I'm afraid I'll have to take your credits and depart."

"You mean we have to wait until your next run to get even?" Hunter asked, grinning broadly.

"My dear old friend," Metallo said, "how many years have we been repeating this scenario? When will you learn?"

Hunter laughed. "Now, wait a minute, Metallo! I seem to recall that it was me, only six months ago, who wiped you clean!" He smacked his lips, the taste of victory still fresh in his mind. Smiling knowingly to the others seated around the table he told them, ""That's why it took her so long to come back to Kabaira."

Laughter filled the air, then suddenly Hunter paled to a shade whiter than the snow-wolves that roamed the mountainsides of his homeworld. He stared toward the door of the cantina. Matt looked up briefly but quickly turned his head, covering his face with one hand. His heart raced.

Metallo followed Hunter's eyes, spotting the Imperial Navy lieutenant and the two stormtroopers who accompanied him. "What do you suppose they're looking for," she said calmly, shifting back in her seat and finding to her surprise that Hunter had disappeared "That's strange," she frowned, scanning the room but seeing no sign of her old friend.

"Damn Imperials," Treimar said softly, trying inconspicuously to peer past Metallo's shoulder. "Always up to no good."

Branak cursed an agreement.

"Quiet, you two," Menise mumbled.

"Yeah," Metallo agreed, gathering her credits from the table. "C'mon, Matt. I think we'll leave now."

Walking behind Metallo, Matt realized the buzz of conversation in the cantina had come to a standstill. All eyes focused on the Imperial visitors. The scrutiny didn't seem to faze them one bit, the lieutenant in charge walked confidently from table to table scanning faces. Strutting past Metallo, he eyed her with more curiosity than suspicion, oblivious to everyone else for several seconds -- until he crashed into Matt.

"Sorry," Matt mumbled.

The young lieutenant glared at Matt, then frowned, a most peculiar expression on his face. "Have we met before?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so," Matt said, not bothering to stop.

The lieutenant grabbed Matt's arm. "No, you *do* seem familiar. What's your name?"

Staring past the officer, Matt saw that Metallo had stopped in her tracks, her antennae twitched noticeably. The band had stopped playing, and the room was still, except for the two stormtroopers who seemed to be moving in slow motion toward the lieutenant. His heart pounded in his ears. "Name's Jamie Brightstar," he said, wondering if anyone else could hear the slight tremble in his voice. "You must be confusin' me with someone else."

The officer cocked his head to one side, his eyes narrowing as he studied Matt in the dimly lit cantina. Raising one brow, he finally shook his head and released Matt from his grip. Without looking back, Matt scooted past Metallo out the door into the cool early evening air.

Fog blanketed the city, a fog as thick as the shadows that haunted Matt. Walking toward the bay where the ship was docked, he couldn't bring himself to look at Metallo, his eyes fixed on the ancient brick-lined streets of Eponte. He clenched his fist, mentally punching himself. Metallo finally broke the silence. "You know," she said, "if that officer knows his Old Corellian, it'll come to him --"

"Huh?" Matt asked.

"The name you used -- Brightstar."

"Oh, yeah," he said, scuffling his boots on the pavement. "I -- I just couldn't think fast enough."

"Well, hopefully we'll be long gone before he figures it out," she said.

Matt nodded, shivering as a light breeze blew in from the mountains to the south.

"You gonna tell me where he knows you from?"

Matt looked at her, a lump forming in the back of his throat. All the old memories of Anii and Alex -- yesterday's shadows -- stirred deep within him. "Yeah, I guess you should know," he began, "I was in the navy--"

"And you left, shall I say, under circumstances which the navy might find inappropriate?"

"I deserted."

Metallo nodded. "It's gonna be impossible to avoid the Empire at some of the ports we hit, Matt. Guess you'll just have to stay out of sight on those occasions."

Matt stared wide-eyed. "You mean you'll keep me on?"

"Well, of course."

"No questions asked?"

"No questions--" Suddenly, blaster fire echoed through the streets. An explosion rocked a building two blocks to the west.

"C'mon," Metallo shouted, "let's get to the ship and get outta here!"

"Right behind you, boss!"

Running the last block to docking bay 10, they scrambled for safety as another explosion lit Eponte's skyline.

Metallo activated the *Star Quest*'s hatch release. "Let's hope they haven't shut down flight ops," she said, slowing down to duck so her head wouldn't rake the entry as she bounded up the ramp into the freighter.

"Maybe it's just some local trouble," Matt added, breathing heavily.

"Awfully big explosion for local trouble," she replied, swiping a hand across the panel to close the hatch behind them. "You missed Treimar's comments last night about Rebel activity here. They've been getting bolder in the city. Could be they're up to something."

"The Rebel Alliance?" Matt asked, two steps ahead of her, as he headed into the cockpit. Metallo nodded.

"Yeah," she said, coming up behind him, practically jumping into her pilot's seat. "They've been stealing medical supplies from the Delgas Corporation right here in Eponte."

"Are they crazy?" Matt cried, as he keyed up spaceport control. "All the Empire has to do is send in one Star Destroyer and wipe 'em all out!"

"You sound like you've seen that happen before."

"Yeah," he said, his voice filled with pain, "I've seen too much." He wondered if he would ever be able to tell Metallo the whole truth about his past. Frustrated, he slapped the comm panel. "Spaceport's denying us clearance, boss."

"Not surprising," Metallo replied. "Guess we're stuck--" A loud crash reverberated through the ship.

"What the *krazsch*!" Metallo shouted, climbing out of her seat back toward the ship's hatch. Pulling her blaster, she pressed the hatch release and cautiously headed down the ramp.

Blaster fire sounded much closer. An armed transport zipped past the docking bay, screeching to a stop less than a block away. Quickly scanning the bay, Metallo caught sight of the prone figure lying beneath her ship.

"Tere, please--"

"Hunter? Good skies, man, what happened?"

"Help me!" he pleaded. "Please--"

"C'mon, Hunt, let me get you inside the ship."

"No, no -- not your ship," he gasped.

Matt came up behind up them, recognizing Metallo's old friend. "What the--"

"Matt," Metallo called, "give me a hand here."

"Right, boss."

Together they helped Hunter up the ramp into the *Star Quest*. "Matt, I've got him," Metallo said, leading Hunter toward the aft cargo hold. "Get the medic."

"Tere, you shouldn't be doing this--" Hunter grimaced as a pain shot through his shoulder.

"Quiet, old friend. Just tell me, what's going on?"

"The Imperials discovered I was working for the Alliance," he told her as Matt rushed back with the medical kit.

"You? A Rebel spy?" she asked, more surprised than ruffled by his announcement.

Hunter nodded weakly.

Matt looked anxiously toward Metallo. How could she be so calm? Her entire career as a free-trader could be on the line. Matt hated the Empire, and knew Metallo had no fond thoughts for anything Imperial. But getting tied up with the Rebels was not something that had ever crossed his mind. Of course, he'd been too drunk the last few years to even think about it. But what would she do?

Near the cargo hatch, Metallo keyed a special sequence of numbers into the access panel. One of the deck plates popped open, revealing a concealed storage chamber.

"Matt, get him fixed up," she said as they gently lowered Hunter into the tiny room.

Matt pulled burnt clothing away from flesh. Hunter nearly passed out from the pain.

"He's in bad shape, boss," Matt said, applying salve to the blaster burn on Hunter's shoulder. "He could use a bacta tank."

"No, I'll be okay," Hunter grimaced. "The others--"

"What others?"

"Must help--" he coughed, "my friends--"

"You're not goin' anywhere, Hunt," Metallo told him. "Now just lie back there and rest."

A metallic rapping sounded on the hull of the ship. "Open up in there!" an authoritative voice shouted.

"More company," Metallo sneered, rolling her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Tere," Hunter said. "I didn't mean -- to cause you trouble."

She shrugged. "Hey, what are friends for?" Grinning, she pointed a finger at him. "Stay quiet until I come back. C'mon, Matt."

Hunter grasped Metallo's hand, squeezing it tightly. "Thanks."

Sealing the deck plate to the concealed storage chamber, Metallo gave a sidelong glance toward Matt. "Never imagined this trip would be so exciting, eh? You know, Matt, I don't want to drag you into this," she said, turning to head up the corridor. "But Hunter and his friends could use our help. It might put us on the run--"

Matt took a deep breath, released it. "It's okay, boss. I told you I was in the navy. I saw things the Empire did -- things I could never condone," he paused by the doorway, closing his eyes briefly to shut out the old pains. "I guess I didn't think there was any way to fight something so big," he said softly. "Maybe I was wrong."

Metallo placed her hand on Matt's shoulder. "Shall we see who's knocking' on our door?" she asked.

As the hatch opened, Metallo caught a glimpse of white armor. "Stormtroopers," she said quietly.

Without thinking, Matt followed her down the ramp of the ship.

"Is there a problem?" Metallo asked, approaching one trooper, noticing a second one poised near the aft cargo hatch of the *Star Quest*

. "We have orders to search every ship in the area," the stormtrooper told her.

"What's going on? I'm carrying legitimate cargo for an Imperial general on Ord Traga," she told him.

"Rebel spies were seen headed in this direction," another familiar voice said, stepping out from behind the stormtrooper. "So, you won't mind showing us your supply manifest and orders."

Metallo hid her frown, eyeballing the Imperial lieutenant she recognized from the cantina. "No, of course not, Lieutenant," she said.

"Yes," he continued, confidently walking up to face Metallo, "the Empire does not look lightly upon treason."

"Treason?" she asked. "What are you talking about?"

Pushing Metallo aside, the lieutenant approached Matt. His hand reached out, lifting Matt's downturned chin. He nodded self-assuredly. "Really, Matt," he said, shaking his head, "I was almost convinced you weren't my former classmate from the Academy."

Matt glanced toward Metallo.

"Yes, I had always wondered what happened to the number one graduate of our class," the lieutenant continued. His voice reeked with sarcasm. "When I'd heard you had deserted, I was quite shocked. After all, we'd expected you to captain your own ship one day."

Matt's face reddened. He clenched his fist, and took a swing at the officer. He didn't see the stormtrooper's blaster rifle butt that came down across his head.

"Search this ship," the lieutenant instructed his subordinates.

"Yes, sir."

"Then take the deserter to the detention center at Imperial headquarters," he ordered. Turning, he faced Metallo. "You have no problem with that, I presume," he said smugly.

"No," she replied, knowing there was nothing she could do to help Matt -- at least for the moment.

"Report to sector headquarters in the morning, Captain," the lieutenant said. "You may be able to convince them that you had no knowledge of your crewman's crime. Perhaps then you will be allowed to leave Kabaira."

Metallo nodded as the two stormtroopers emerged from the ship.

"No one else on board, Lieutenant," one of the stormtroopers reported.

"Have a nice evening, Captain," the lieutenant said. "Let's move out, men."

Metallo pursed her lips and watched them drag Matt's unconscious body away. Outside the docking bay, there were no transports racing by, no blaster fire. Eponte's streets had turned deadly quiet.

* * *

Feeling any better," Metallo asked when Hunter woke up.

Groaning, he tried to grin. "Being dead couldn't feel much worse," he said, rolling his shoulder to relieve the stiffness that had set in. "What's happened? How long have I been out?"

"Two hours. I found out that a half dozen of your friends were killed. Two others are in the detention center," she told him.

Hunter looked away, burying his face with his hands. "Six killed," he repeated quietly. "Someone tipped off the Imperials. They knew exactly where my people were meeting."

"Is that why you rushed out of the cantina?"

He nodded. "But what they didn't know was that I would be late."

"Because you were playing sabacc with me."

"Yes," he said. "If I'd arrived on time, I doubt I would be here now."

"It's been a long time since things seemed this bad," Metallo grimaced. "I've got a wounded Rebel spy hiding out beneath the deck plates of my ship. And my co-pilot's been arrested."

A puzzled look furrowed Hunter's brow. "Matt was arrested?"

"Do you believe this? Out of the millions of planets with Imperial troops, we ended up in a port where one officer recognized him."

"What's he wanted for?"

"He's a deserter," she said.

"Since when did you take up with wanted criminals, Tere?"

"I didn't know Matt had been in the navy until a few hours ago. Speaking of criminals -- since when did *you* take up with the Rebel Alliance?"

He smiled. "Almost three years now. We've been doing little things here on Kabaira. You heard Treimar."

"He's not one of yours I hope--"

"No, no. Talks too much," Hunter laughed, grimacing when another pain ran down his arm.

"So, stealing medical supplies--"

"And weapons," Hunter added. "The medical goods have been shipped offworld to the Rebel fleet. They desperately need our help."

"And the weapons?"

"We were storing them here to use against the Empire."

"You think someone in your organization is a traitor?"

"Certainly looks that way," he nodded.

Thoughtfully, Metallo ran her finger along the scar on her cheek. "Any ideas?"

Hunter's eyebrows raised in question. "A jailbreak? Aren't you in enough trouble already?" he asked her.

"I'm not gonna let Matt rot in an Imperial cell. You've got friends locked up, too," Metallo told him. "Maybe we can smoke out your informer in the process."

Hunter looked at her. "I knew there was a reason why I came to you for help."

"Look," she insisted, "I'm only doing this to get Matt--"

"Sure," he nodded. "In a rancor's eye!" Turning serious, he said, "You know, you may never work--"

"I know, I know," she said. "Now, c'mon. We're gonna need more help for this operation. And I bet your people know that HQ building better than they know the backs of their hands."

"Yeah," Hunter agreed, holding his arm out so Metallo could help him up.

Grinning, she shook her head. "This is real cute, Hunter. What a pair we make - one slightly obvious female from Riileb, carting around a man with a blast wound. Do you think anyone'll notice?"

"This was your idea, remember?"

"Right," she nodded, helping him to his feet. "Let's go."

* * *

Matt rubbed the knot on the back of his head and grimaced quietly to himself. Sunlight filtered through his prison window. He'd been unconscious for quite a while. Across the cell, one man snored loudly. The third occupant of the cell lay awake, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Matt sat up, placing both feet on the floor. Gripping the sides of the bunk with both hands, he pushed off hoping he wouldn't fall flat on his face. Dizzy, he pressed the back of his legs against the bed rails to steady himself. He took a deep breath, then plodded across the cell toward the window. Its lower edge appeared to be less than a meter above his head. He stretched, and one fingertip just touched the ledge.

"Can't get out that way," the man who'd been snoring said.

"No, I didn't really think so," Matt replied, turning to face his cellmate. The man was old, his slicked-back hair was completely white. Wrinkles lined a face that time had not been kind to.

Sitting up, the oldster threw his legs over the side of the bunk. "Don't think I know you, son. How'd you get stuck in a cell with a couple of Rebel spies?"

Matt shifted his gaze from the old man. Their cellmate still hadn't moved. He solemnly scrutinized the checkerboard pattern on the ceiling, seemingly oblivious to the conversation.

"My name's Matt Turhaya," he told the old man. "You were involved in those explosions last night?"

"Yep. Me and Chaz there," he pointed toward the wiry teenager. "I'm Blaide, by the way. Yep, old Imps caught the two of us."

Chaz came to life suddenly, jumping off the bunk. He walked up to Matt and eyed him suspiciously. "Watch it, Blaide. He could be a plant."

"Knocked him 'round pretty good for a plant, Chaz," Blaide grinned.

"That doesn't prove a thing," Chaz said. He raked his fingers through the long blond hair that fell across emerald-green eyes, eyes that were filled with experiences far beyond his years.

"Yeah, you're right, Chaz," Blaide conceded, "there's no way we can be sure Mr. Turhaya's who he says he is. I must be gettin' old."

"I'm no spy," Matt insisted.

"So, why'd they lock you up?" Chaz asked.

"The Imperials were looking for one of your friends. They got me instead."

"I knew it!" Blaide said, slapping his hand across his leg. "Told you, Chaz, didn't I?"

"Knew what?" Matt asked, puzzled by Blaide's outburst.

"Our friend -- it's gotta be Dodger. I told you he got away!"

"Dodger?" Matt repeated.

"Our cell leader."

"We still can't be certain it's him, Blaide." Chaz's voice trembled slightly. "Could have been one of the others."

"Keep your spirits up, young Chaz." A subtle smile crept across Blaide's face as he rose from his bunk. He walked toward the two younger men and placed his arm across Chaz's shoulder. "If Dodger's still alive, I'd say we have a pretty good chance of gettin' outta here," Blaide nodded confidently. "Yep, I'm beginnin' to feel a lot better about this mess we're in."

But as the day dragged on, Matt began to wonder if anyone could do anything to help them. He heard the change of guards down the corridor at the security station. The dinner trays had just been picked up, and the lights had been dimmed in the cell bay. The sun had dipped low in the early evening sky. Shadows fell across the cell.

Then out of nowhere, a whining female voice echoed down the hallway.

"Sergeant," the woman was saying, her high-pitched tone grating on Matt's ears, "what do you mean you have no record of this call?"

Blaide walked toward the bars that separated them from freedom. Chaz sat up in his bunk leaning on one elbow, ears perked. They couldn't hear the guard's response to the woman's question. But her retort was even louder.

"Do you mean that some *incomp* called me when I'm supposed to be getting off duty and got me over here for nothing!" There was a moment of silence. "Look, it's right here, Sergeant -- 1842 hours -- EDO call, prisoner ill, come immediately."

Chaz groaned, falling back onto the bunk. Matt jerked around and stared at him, then smiled to himself. Groaning again, Chaz writhed on the bed.

"There," the female called, "I told you there was a sick man here!" She took off down the cell bay.

The stormtrooper pounded the floor right behind her. "You'll have to wait and let me verify this with the EDO," he insisted.

Chaz was gagging now. Matt had never seen a man turn that shade of blue before.

"Hurry up," Blaide yelled from their cell, "he's havin' trouble breathin'!"

Matt eyed the short, dark-browed young woman who came into view. A cap hid what little hair was on her head. Her black tunic was sharply pressed, an Imperial uniform with insignia of the medical corp and the rank badge of lieutenant. "Open this door, Sergeant," she ordered.

"He's just a Rebel spy, Lieutenant. They're going to terminate him in a few hours anyway," the stormtrooper grunted.

"Sergeant, if you want to execute him, that's fine. But my duty is to make certain he's well enough to stand up in front of that firing squad. After all," she said sarcastically, wrinkling her nose at the men behind the bars, "we want to be sure all their friends know that we mean business. Now," she insisted, "open this door."

"Stand back, you two," the stormtrooper motioned toward Blaide and Matt. He keyed the security code into the access panel. With his blaster rifle held ready, the trooper stepped into the cell. The lieutenant was two steps behind him already digging into her medical bag when the turbolift door slid open at the far end of the corridor.

Two shots rang out near the security station.

Reacting swiftly, the trooper turned, stopping in mid-motion when he realized the lieutenant was pointing a blaster pistol at his head. "Drop your weapon, Sergeant," she said.

Another pair of footsteps echoed down the corridor as the trooper's blaster rifle clattered to the floor. Matt stared in disbelief as Metallo trotted up to the cell. "Everyone okay?" she asked. The tension in her face drained when she spotted Matt in the corner of the cell.

"Just a few lumps, boss," Matt told her, rubbing the sore spot on the back of his head.

"Let's get out of here," Blaide suggested, bending down to pick up the stormtrooper's blaster rifle. In one swift movement he straightened, ramming the butt of the rifle into the trooper's chest. The man pitched backwards and Blaide tackled him to the ground grabbing his helmet and twisting it until the trooper's neck snapped.

"Was that necessary?" Metallo asked.

"We can use the rifle. Who asked you anyway?"

"That's enough, Blaide," the lieutenant scowled.

"Good to see you again, Midget," Chaz greeted the young woman, bounding down off the bunk.

"Your performance was commendable, Chaz," she replied. She pointed toward the dead man's uniform. "Now, let's see how well you play stormtrooper."

Five minutes later Midget guided their skiff along Eponte's streets as the sun crept below the horizon. Fog had settled over the city. Street lamps glowed as if a sheer curtain encased them. One burnt-out building still smoldered from the brief battle of the evening before.

Blaide glanced around nervously when stormtroopers stopped them at one checkpoint. Chaz, standing stiffly in the back of the vehicle, held a blaster rifle across his armored chest. Midget handed a datapad to one of the troopers. Cocking his head, he studied the orders it displayed, then slowly eyed her prisoners.

"Experimental research, eh, Lieutenant?" the stormtrooper asked.

"That's right, Captain," Midget replied.

"Never saw anything like that one before," he said, pointing toward Metallo.

"Interesting, isn't she?"

"What about the other two?"

"I'm just the delivery person, Captain. I have no idea what they've got planned for them," she replied as two other troopers approached the skiff.

Shifting uncomfortably, Blaide bumped into Chaz and knocked him off balance. Alarmed, one of the stormtroopers brought his blaster rifle to bear on the group.

"It's okay," Chaz said, "I've got everything under control."

"You'd better, Sergeant," the captain replied.

"If you don't mind, Captain, I need to move on," Midget said.

"One moment, Lieutenant," he replied.

Matt threw a worried look at Metallo. Calm and cool, she turned slightly so her hands were hidden from view. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Blaide behind him, nodding subtly at Chaz.

The captain turned to one of his subordinates. "Sergeant--"

Before he'd had a chance to say another word, blaster fire lit the checkpoint station. Midget fired her pistol at the stormtrooper captain. Metallo whipped her own blaster up and took out a second trooper as Chaz exchanged fire with the third.

"Get us out of here!" Metallo shouted.

Midget gunned the controls as a blast ripped into the back end of the skiff. Blaide got off one last shot, hitting the stormtrooper that Chaz had missed.

"I knew I shouldn't have taken that shortcut," Midget said.

"It's okay, Midget. We're all safe," Metallo told her.

"Incompetent idiots," Blaide mumbled under his breath.

"Lucky for us," Chaz said.

"Hey, Midget, where are we headed anyway?" Blaide asked. "Docking bay 10."

"No sign of pursuit," he told her as the skiff whipped down the street past a row of darkened warehouses. "What happened to Dodger?"

"He's waiting for us."

"Told ya', didn't I, Chaz?"

"Yeah, you were right, Blaide," Chaz replied, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Docking bay 10," Blaide repeated. "Are we goin' somewhere?" "

"I'll be glad to take you offworld if you don't think you're safe on Kabaira," Metallo said.

"You've got a ship?"

"Yep. It's an old Suwantek freighter. I usually transport supplies, but I think I can smuggle out a few Rebel spies without any problem."

Blaide nodded. "Good," he said quietly. He aimed his blaster at Metallo. "I think that's all I need to know."

"Blaide?"

"Sorry, Chaz. Maybe I'm just an ol' fool. But I plan to be on the winnin' side when all's said an' done." Shrugging, he squeezed the trigger on the blaster rifle.

"No!" Matt shouted, diving toward Blaide just as the rifle discharged. Struck by the blast, Matt collapsed as the skiff swerved sharply around a curve. Chaz stumbled headfirst into Blaide. Blaide shoved him aside, trying to regain his balance. He pulled himself upright. Wide-eyed, an expression of disbelief on his face, he found himself staring down the barrel of Metallo's blaster. She fired. Clutching his belly, Blaide gasped for one last breath and fell to the floor of the skiff next to Matt.

Metallo knelt beside Matt. "Don't you die on me, Matt. Not after all the trouble I've gone to!"

"I'm all right, boss," Matt grimaced, sitting up slowly as the skiff rounded another curve in the road.

"What were you tryin' to do? Get yourself killed?"

"He just nicked me, boss. You're not gonna get rid of me that easily."

Metallo smiled, squeezing his arm. "Thanks, Matt," she said as the skiff pulled up to docking bay 10.

Hunter emerged from the ship greeting his friends at the bottom of the ramp. Smiling, he grasped Chaz in a bear hug. "Thought I'd lost you, son," he said.

"I'm okay, Dad," Chaz whispered into his father's ear, hearing the sharp intake of breath as the older man winced in pain. "What about you?"

"Fine. Everything's fine now."

Outside the docking bay another skiff screeched around the corner.

"We've got company!" Midget shouted.

"Time to leave, friends," Metallo said, heading up the ramp into the ship with Matt right behind her.

Hunter slapped the hatch release as soon as everyone was on board. "Go, Tere! Get us out of here!" he shouted toward the cockpit.

The ship lifted slowly off the duracrete floor of the landing bay.

Kicking up dirt, it left a cloud behind as a dozen stormtroopers rushed into the bay.

"Matt, can you handle--"

"No problem, boss. Plottin' us a course straight away from here," he told her, feverishly punching keys on the co-pilot's console. "Spaceport's hailing us. They're ordering us to turn back."

"Picking up several signals, Matt."

"What are they?" Hunter asked, scanning the skies as the *Star Quest* left Kabaira's atmosphere and headed toward the star-studded blackness of deep space.

"Three Headhunters," Matt replied. "Probably the local space patrol."

Chaz came up beside his father in the cockpit. "Did I hear you say Headhunters?"

"Yeah."

"You got a fast ship, Captain?" Chaz asked.

"She's pretty good, young man," Metallo replied.

"Shields up," Matt reported. "Thirty seconds 'til we jump." Metallo studied the ship's sensors. The Z-95s were gaining a little ground on them.

"Fancy flyin' time, boys. Better strap yourselves in," she told them as the *Star Quest* banked sharply to port. She winked at her co-pilot. "Remind me, Matt, when we reach a safe port, we need to do some engine mods if we're gonna stay in this line of work!"

Matt smiled. "Right, boss," he said as the ship twisted through a series of curls. Several shots whipped across the bow.

"Time?"

"Five seconds."

"We're away," Metallo called, pulling back on the hyperdrive.

Mottled stars filled the viewscreen as the *Star Quest* made its passage into hyperspace. Matt watched the stars blur into starlines, marvelling at the incredible beauty of it all. And for the first time in longer than he could remember, he felt whole again. He wasn't sure what the future held in store, but for now it was a beginning, a new passage in his life, with new friends, new battles ... and new enemies.

Out of the Cradle

The speeder bike bucked in protest, churning up mounds of black sand against the dune. "Thanks for the company, kid!" the rider yelled over the shrieking engines. Drake Paulsen stepped away from the stranger, shaking black soot from his clothing and hair. Gritty, sand-encrusted fingers wiped at his flight goggles, erasing stubborn soot from the lens.

"Thanks for the ride!" Drake shouted back, scurrying up the face of the dune. He pulled the sand-saturated rag from his face, refreshed by the cool air blowing gently against his skin. Glancing over his shoulder, he listened, then hollered. "They'll be here any minute."

The nomad revved the supercharged engine, spinning the steering bar as he gunned the throttle. The bike swerved uncontrollably, kicking up sand and debris as the vehicle accelerated over the parched flatland. Drake scampered up the dune, his lithe frame accustomed to the loose earth shifting between his fingers. Near the summit, breathless, he threw himself into the sand bed, turning to catch a glimpse of the nomad's shadow before it vanished between the desert swells.

The word *socorro* was Old Corellian for scorched earth. Drake could think of no name better suited to described his birthworld. From pole to pole, the blackened crests of hardened volcanic ash covered the planet. In the distance, the Rym mountain range stood in silent testament of the long dead volcanoes that laid the ash.

Sighing, Drake leaned into the dune, resting his head against the sand. He heard the distinct whine of the approaching hunters, mounted on greatly overpriced, grossly undermodified desert bikes. Confident, the young Socorran waved at them, smiling when they paused indecisively, their figures wavering unsteadily in the thermal fumes rising from the desert floor. For a moment, Drake worried that they might come after him and, unconsciously, he thumbed the restraint from his sporting blaster, feeling the familiar heel against his palm. There was no price on his head and there was little to be gained from a 15-year-old boy who unwittingly managed to catch a ride with a known galactic felon. Drake heard himself sigh when the bounty hunters finally moved on, heading back into the Doaba Badlands after more profitable game.

Nestled in the womb of his homeworld, Drake pushed the goggles back against an unruly length of brown hair. Absently, he fingered the golden hoop at his left lobe, his blue eyes struggling in the glare of Socorro's waning sun. The thin mask of desert soot could not hide the handsome, bronze face, nor the smirk of satisfaction that crossed his lips. Abruptly, the first cold breeze swept in from the badlands. Drake tugged at the leather cord about his neck, rolling the small pouch between his fingers. Reluctantly, he pulled himself from the embrace of the sand, stretching his stiffening joints before making his way to the top of the ridge.

Soco-Jarel space station was alive and animated with the incoming and outgoing traffic of heavy transports and planet skippers. Muffled by the deep sands, Drake could feel the power generators buried beneath the ground and hear the voices of technicians, droids, and machinery, even as the wind carried the shrill whine of a faulty ion drive to his ears. Carefully navigating the unsteady crest of the dune, Drake paused, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, as he cast a final glimpse at the storm clouds moving in across the horizon.

Oblivious to the natural wonders of this world, Soco-Jarel extended far into the desert for several kilometers, using external hangars and flight pads to welcome freighters and transports from across the galaxy. The northern entrance was only a few meters away from the threshold of the planetary capital, Vakeyya, the only recognized city on the face of the planet.

"Kaine?"

Pulled from his reverie, Drake started down the ridge. Using the hardened creases blasted into the rock by freighter exhaust and firing rockets, he slid down the final slope. He deliberately kept the glare of the sun just over his right shoulder, an old nomadic superstition for good luck. "It's just me, Toob," Drake replied, grasping the steady hand.

"I heard rumors about your old man coming back," the aging freighter captain said. Then eyeing the sporting blaster at the younger man's hip, he added, "Running kind of light, aren't you?"

Easily disguising his horror with embarrassment, Drake smiled into the Corellian's scarred face. The surgeons left a smooth patch of yellowed scar tissue where the backdraft from a homemade thermal detonator had blown away Toob's left eye. They replaced the other eye with a cybernetic unit, which fit poorly into the sagging, damaged socket. Drake remembered that a would-be bounty hunter booby-trapped a warehouse bulkhead with the faulty explosive that ruined Toob's face, injured another man, and left seven others dead, including the bounty hunter. The injuries were nearly a month old, and yet they appeared as recent as a few days. "Dad says I'm not ready for a heavy blaster," Drake confessed, gratefully staring away from Toob's face.

"If you can hold it and shoot it, then you're old enough." Toob sighed. "Galaxy ain't safe no more, not even here in Vakeyya," he grumbled, a sound that Drake could only define as defeat. "It's like I always said, there's two kinds of life on Socorro, predators ..."

"And bigger, smarter, faster predators," Drake finished.

Toob grinned wryly. It was an honest effort against the thick scar tissue covering his face. "Spoken like a true rogue." Noticing the pouch at Drake's chest, he opened it and poured the contents into his gloved hand, smiling over the childhood relics: a baby tooth, a ring made from the broken stem of an ion coil, and a mummified lizard claw. "I'm going away for a while, Drake," Toob said, replacing the items, "to rest up." He hesitated, then added, "If you or your father ever need a place ... look me up on Vedis IV."

"I'll tell him," Drake replied, staring into the smuggler's eye. "Clear skies, Toob."

Toob stooped, drawing lines in the earth at Drake's feet. Cupping a small mound of sand in his hand, he poured it into the leather pouch, pulling the cord to seal the top. "Always remember where you came from, boy. It's one thing nobody can take from you." Silently, he brushed past Drake, walking in the direction of the lower docking bay.

Drake forced a breath into his lungs, feeling a tremendous weight settle over him. He watched the old man's back, realizing from words and deeds that Toob was going away to die, offworld, as was expected. No one died on Socorro. It was taboo to even speak of the dead, who were not really dead but "offworld on business." Despite this and other bizarre traditions, Socorrans felt an immeasurable sense of cultural pride. Beneath the darkening sky, Drake could only feel pity.

The young Socorran shrugged against the infinitesimal weight of the sand. Patiently, he waited to see Toob's ship, the *Glory*, dust off from the station, her ion drive whistling into the upper atmosphere. As he watched, the light freighter seemed to vaporize, swallowed whole by incoming storm clouds. Drake absently pulled at his earring, untangling the gold hoop from his curls. Silently, he made his way through the familiar shadows of the city to the Black Dust Tavern.

"Well, I'll be a baby rancor's teething ball!" a voice cried from the back of the tavern. "Lom! When did you jet in?"

Drake shrugged off the insult of his childhood nickname. A few of the tavern patrons, native and offworld, nodded to him. Respectfully, he returned the silent gesture, stepping up to the bar.

"By all the moons of Nal Hutta, boy!" the salty pirate swore, moving toward him.

Drake grinned, desperately trying to focus his eyes on the venerable face of Karl Ancher, his father's oldest partner and friend. He tried to ignore the peculiar limp in Ancher's gait, a stride too painful for the young Socorran to watch. Ancher was the other survivor of the homemade detonator, which left the aging smuggler with a few months to contemplate his notorious occupation and a cybernetic leg implant.

"How are you, Lom?" he chanted musically. Deftly swinging a mug onto the counter, he poured a generous portion of Socorran raava into it.

"I set down a few hours ago," Drake replied, taking a sip. The rich brown liquid was sweet with an unexpected bite. He winced as the bitter raava burned going down his throat.

"How's your pop?"

"Fine, but the Miss Chance is having hydraulic trouble again," Drake croaked, hoarse from the raava. "He's bringing her into the station for repairs."

"Whatever happened with that fancy Ghtroc that your dad swore he'd own?" Ancher winked with mischief. "Even if he had to steal it."

"The Steadfast?" Drake grinned wickedly. "Well hidden," he whispered. "Somewhere in the Doaba Badlands."

The old Corellian's eyes glazed with pride. "Somewhere in the Doaba Badlands," he grumbled, "where only a water beetle could find her."

Behind the bar, among a menagerie of holographic pictures and fixed imprints, Drake saw a holographic etching of his father, standing beside his mentors, Karl and Toob.

Needing only his smuggler's sense to follow Drake's eyes, Ancher whispered. "Guess, you met Toob on the way to the station."

Drake nodded without comment, staring into the glossy reflection.

"Lom," Ancher sighed, leaning against the counter. "I hope you never learn the lessons that me and old Toob had to. I taught your daddy the tricks that I taught myself. The same tricks he's teaching you. All with the hope that you won't end up like Toob, all broken up and scared inside."

Drake shrugged. "That'll never happen to me, Ancher."

The patriarchal Corellian did not return the sly grin. "Some wounds run deep, Lom, deeper than even a Socorran pirate's heart."

Drake heard the tavern door open. The usual bar noise and banter of patrons fell suddenly mute. There was a long pause as footsteps echoed inside the front room and then the door closed. Casually glancing over his shoulder, Drake saw, though not clearly in the dimness, three unfamiliar figures. Anxious, he thumbed the restraint over his blaster, taking his cues from the more experienced Ancher.

"Watch your back, kid," Ancher whispered. "Some of your daddy's distant relations are coming."

On Socorro, there was no such thing as an enemy, only "distant relations." Born into the smuggling tradition, Drake was familiar with the obscure underground of his birthworld and the shadows that never seemed to fade. One of those reoccurring figures was a Sluissi, Secles Uslopos, who worked as councilor to one of Socorro's more feared overlords, Abdi-Badawzi. Humanoid from the waist up, a deep purple tunic draped the narrow shoulders of the Sluissi. Below this, his serpent body seemed to remold itself over and over as he slithered into the tavern, promptly followed by two gruff and disorderly Gamorreans.

Folding his hands before him, as if in prayer, the Sluissi raised himself up on his tail, weaving hypnotically side to side and hissing in a low voice.

"What do you mean don't be alarmed?" Ancher spat.

Drake stared at the Corellian and then at the Sluissi, realizing that Ancher's angry statement was in response to the alien.

Unflinching, Secles hissed, "Greetingsss friend Ancher and young Paulsssen, I am pleassed the rumorsss we have heard prove true." Extending his arms to each side, he gushed, "You and your father have returned, triumphantly, to Sssocorro. Welcome. Welcome home."

"What's it to you, leather head?" Ancher spat, casually setting a blaster rifle on the bar.

The Sluissi hesitated, as if contemplating the insult. The Gamorreans behind him began grunting with intense agitation. Their brown and pink snouts glistened with mucous, complementing the drool swinging from their jowls. Secles softly hissed, "I am here on behalf of the honorable Abdi-Badawzi."

Drake frowned. "And what does Abdi want?"

The Sluissi blushed, a pink flush radiating in the pale pigment behind his head. "The Magnificent One hasss assked for the great Chu'la and hisss ssson to grant him one sssmall favor, for which each ssshall be well compensssated."

"No," Drake said curtly, turning back to the bar.

"Abdi-Badawzi wasss quite ssspecific," the Sluissi hissed. The hood at the back of his head quivered nervously. "You would refussse to pay ressspect to your father'sss mentor and only benefactor?"

"I would," Drake replied, drinking the rest of his raava.

"You heard the boy!" Ancher quickly snapped. "Scratch gravel, leather head."

The Sluissi fumbled in the front panels of his robes. The action, though slow and deliberate, set Drake on the edge. He drew his blaster in one swift, swinging motion, bringing the muzzle a meter from the Sluissi's face. Steady in

his grip, Drake stared into the alien's face, aware of the seething Gamorreans about to surround him.

"Do it and I'll blast your choobies all across the back wall," Ancher snapped from behind the blaster rifle.

"My pardonsss." Graciously, the Sluissi bowed in submission, calmly removing a package from his robes. "Abdi-Badawzi offerssss thisss payment, 1,500 creditsss for your pressence alone, young Paulsssen. Two thousssand for your father, Chu'la, to appear."

Ancher was impressed with the offer, but previous experience with the deceptive^{34e} Twi'lek gangster had his smuggler's sense trumpeting with alarm. "Lom?" he whispered, sighting the largest of the Gamorrean through his scope.

"I said no," Drake replied.

Ancher cleared his throat, then growled, "Take your money and your musssscle," he glared at the Gamorreans as he mocked the Sluissi's accent, "and get out of my bar."

Without further argument, the Sluissi bowed and waved the Gamorreans to follow him through the door. As they retreated, Drake noted an arsenal of illegal weapons and anxious triggers beneath the tables. Several of the tavern patrons sighed, visibly relieved to see the Sluissi and the Gamorreans leave.

"Back for a few hours and Badawzi is already trying to add you and your dad to his collection of burnouts." Ancher shook his head, replacing the blaster rifle under the bar. "You better watch your back, kid. Badawzi usually gets what he wants."

"I better go," Drake sighed, drinking the last of the raava.

"Remember what I said," Ancher scolded. "Watch your back."

Pausing to check for a clear path to the docking hangar, Drake turned to the old Corellian and smiled. "Take care, Ancher." He vanished into the night outside the tavern door.

Burdensome clouds moved in from the deep desert, threatening the skies above Vakeyya with rain, rain that in nearly a millennium had not fallen. The search beacons illuminated a clear kilometer-high ceiling above the spaceport. Drake paused to stare at the swaying, hypnotic routine of the lights. They reminded him of the intruding Sluissi in the bar. Shivering against the cold, he felt an abrupt, odd sensation of numbness traveling throughout his limbs. Before his eyes, the docking bay lights shifted and wavered, spiraling in the sporadic pattern of hyperspace.

Horried, Drake recognized the effects of a blaster's slow stun setting. He fought desperately to resist the paralyzing force. The Black Dust Tavern was only a few meters to the side of him. He tried to call out against his unseen attacker, but was instantly cut off by a hand gripping him about the neck. The young Socorran dropped to his knees, a deliberate position of surrender; but the hand did not release him, even as he gasped for air. He passed out.

Drake awoke to a dull ache inside his head. Moaning, he craned his neck against the pillows to temporarily relieve the pressure of pinched nerves. He recalled his last vague memories of the Gamorreans dragging him into a nearby alley and choking him unconscious. His next recollection was of Secles staring anxiously into his face, checking his dilated pupils for life. Though he barely understood Gamorrean, there must have been a brief argument about Abdi-Badawzi's wrath if the son of Chu'la were permanently injured. Next, with vivid clarity, Drake remembered the main throne room of Abdi-Badawzi's underground fortress, where dazed and stunned, he had fallen to his knees before Badawzi's throne and into his father's arms.

Drake sat bolt upright. The action was so sudden that he doubled over immediately, overcome with dizziness and nausea. He struggled from the bed and collapsed to the floor. Cool sweat dried against his skin as he propped himself against the bed frame, unable to distinguish where the effects of the stun ended and where the physical abuse began. Barely conscious, he glanced about the room, recognizing the compartment. Early in his life, while his father smuggled for Badawzi, Drake had come to think of this particular, much neglected place as home. There was even a box of toys left behind in a corner where he last remembered them -- wooden blaster rifles and pistols, blackened with soaps and dyes, now graying with dust mites and age. Cobwebs ran intricate patterns through freighter ship models, complete with smuggling plates and hidden sentry guns. Drake examined a crude model of a YT-1300 freighter, shaking the smuggling plate loose. A cache of Socorran credits fell into

his hand. Under the waning Republic, the money was as valueless as the sand beneath his feet.

Staring about the room, as if lost in a strange place, he was again only five standard years old. For one stale, dusty moment Drake imagined that his father might suddenly burst through the door, showering him with trinkets stolen from the latest smuggling venture.

Leaning against the bulkhead for support, Drake tried the keypad, surprised to find the hatch unlocked. Cautiously, he peered into the outer hallway. His blaster and holster were missing, leaving him vulnerable; regardless, he continued into the corridor. Unerringly, he stumbled through the winding tunnels and into the main chamber of Badawzi's fortress, led by a faint buzzing sound. Standing at the base of two gigantic metal doors, Drake pressed his ear against the cold surface. The buzz was no louder, but he was certain the noise was coming from the opposite side. Quickly glancing about the tunnel, he noticed no other doors. Reluctantly, he punched the keypad.

Noise blasted from the inner chamber as Drake found himself suddenly immersed in a large congregation of aliens, humanoid and otherwise, representing nearly every sector of the galaxy. Not since leaving Abdi-Badawzi's underworld monarchy had he been among such a diverse cross-section of felons and criminals. The spacious chamber echoed with the babble of various alien dialects, most of which were familiar to him. Others seemed to echo in the hollow memories of his childhood, memories that were haunted by the mortal specter sitting in the far corner of the room -- Abdi-Badawzi.

Offworlders claimed there were few people, few things, truly born on the shadowy face of Socorro. To gaze upon the bizarre character of Abdi-Badawzi was to believe that no other planet was capable of producing such a rare sun. The Twi'lek dressed in thick dark robes, which flowed from the high collar at his neck to the floor. His rich black skin glistened with sweat, lightly scenting the air about him with the smell of freshly toiled earth. Wrapped about the base of his large skull, his tentacles twitched casually, as subtle as an after-thought.

"Sssilence!" cried Secles. In homage, the Sluissi's body was stretched to its full length, pressed to the floor before the Twi'lek's throne. "Sssilence!" he screeched.

The crowded room went instantly silent, a multitude of alien optic orbs and eyes turning to the throne. In a synchronized wave, they fell to their knees, their massive combined shadows seeming to retreat from the presence seated before them, leaving Drake closer to the throne than he expected. Badawzi laughed. It was a sinister sound, even to his senses. His tentacles twitched slightly, uncurling from his bulbous head.

The Sluissi straightened, nodding to the underworld lord. Turning to Drake, he raised himself up on his tail, swaying pompously side to side. "The most honored and beloved Abdi-Badawzi is pleased ..."

"I understood him," Drake snapped. His voice was clear and even, reverberating through the quiet chamber. Though few ever mastered the intricacies of the Twi'lek silent language, he was probably one of the few who could interpret the subtle shifts and movements of the Twi'lek's appendages. The young Socorran's mastery of language acquisition was an asset to his father and at one time a novelty among Badawzi's court. "What do you want, Abdi?"

"Is this how you greet the most cherished friend of your good father?" Abdi questioned in perfect Socorran, feigning injury.

Drake replied, "Distant relations should stay distant." He paused. "To avoid bad blood."

"If there is any petchuk between us, young Paulsen," Abdi began, using the Old Corellian word for animosity, "it was unintended."

"Then why am I here?"

Abdi-Badawzi inclined his head to the side, caressing his gaunt cheeks. "Your manners are appalling, even for a pirate."

Under his breath, Drake swore the worst of Socorran oaths. "Abdi, what ..."

"What do I want?" The Twi'lek rose from his throne, a monarch's scepter falling to the floor before him. Secles quickly slithered beneath it, catching the red crystal rod in his coils. Badawzi stared at the scepter and then at the groveling Sluissi. Moving away from the raised platform, he stepped on them both.

"Thank you, merciful massster," Secles grunted.

Ignoring the Sluissi, Badawzi said, "I want to grant you the wish of a lifetime, young Paulsen, a chance to outshine your father, the great Chu'la, and ..."

"No!"

"And possibly save his life." Malevolently, Badawzi nodded to his Gamorrean bodyguards. Momentarily leaving the chamber, they returned carrying the writhing figure of Kaine Paulsen between them.

Bound and gagged, Kaine struggled against the rope restraining his hands behind his back. It took three Gamorreans to hold the 35-year-old Socorran pirate in one place. His handsome face flushed with his efforts, but he hesitated upon seeing Drake. His eyes went directly to Badawzi. Alarmed at the bruises on his son's throat, Kaine began his struggles anew and managed to kick one of the Gamorreans in the face.

"No need to fear, Chu'la. Your only child has always been safe within my walls." Badawzi smiled, showing rows of sharp teeth.

Staring into his father's anxious eyes, Drake whispered, "Just say what you want, Abdi."

"Safe delivery of a small cargo."

"Where?"

"The location isn't important to you."

Drake scowled. "And the cargo?"

"You needn't concern yourself."

"Then what am I doing here?" Drake snapped.

Abdi grinned, a visible pleasure spreading across his ominous features. "You will be the decoy."

"No!" came the muffled reply from Kaine. The Gamorreans regrouped to control his flailing body. "Drake!" His long brown hair was disheveled and loose from the band. His handsome face flushed with unadulterated fury.

Glaring across the room at Badawzi, Drake whispered, "What are the terms?"

"Then it's agreed," the Twi'lek declared, offering his hand for the Socorran to kiss in homage to seal the pact.

"Don't expect me to be part of your fantasy, Badawzi." Drake crossed his arms over his chest, impatiently waiting for the details.

Abdi-Badawzi stared down his nose at the insulting young pirate, his frown immediate and his wrath obvious. "Halbert!" he shouted.

A towering monstrosity of a man shuffled from the shadows, groveling at Badawzi's feet. "Yes, exalted one." His voice seemed a whisper, forced to travel from some great depth within the 2.5 meter frame. Matted black hair hung listlessly down the Corellian's back; shorter lengths grew from all angles on top of his abnormally large head. The stale scent of Gamorrean beer followed the smuggler's every motion, wafting into the air when he moved. Drake groaned, recognizing the signs of a burnout long overdue for disaster. Staring at the bloated body, he was amazed that such a big man could cower so low to the whims of a Twi'lek's ego.

"You've complained about needing another pilot," Badawzi sighed, yawning. "Now you have one, try and manage not to blow him up like you killed the last one."

"Of course, Abdi-Badawzi, Magnificent Abdi-Bad ..." Halbert's voice was cut off when the scepter slammed into the base of his skull.

"Silence!" Badawzi spat. "I grow weary of losing freighters to your incompetence, Halbert. I think this time I'll send someone to keep a watchful eye on you. Parr'Sratt, my freighter, the Seldom Different, is prepped in the departure bay. Make certain that it returns to Socorro in one piece."

Standing apart from the other patrons of Badawzi's court, a Coynite warrior walked toward the Twi'lek monarch, bowing in respect. "Tracc'sorr, Ag'Tra'Abdi-Badawzi," he swore in a smooth, even voice.

"Nothing must interfere with my shipment to the Nodgra system," Badawzi said, returning to his throne.

"Al'ha'gra," Parr'Sratt acknowledged, forcing Halbert to stand.

Awed, Drake swept his eyes over the 2.8 meter frame, fully armored in ceremonial gear. The razor edge of the coyn'skar, a pole-arm combination axe from the Coyn homeworld, stood at his side, the shaft elaborately carved with runic symbols of valor. Soft, downy brown fur covered a noble but haunted face, blanketing a raised brow ridge and a dignified snout. A raven black mane tied in an intricate series of braids and knots framed gray eyes. Drake had spent a lifetime among the stars, seeing the marvels and mysteries of the galaxy. This Coynite was unlike anything the young Socorran had ever seen and the sight of the alien warrior brought a new, profound feeling of fear.

Alarmed, he turned to his father, only to find Kaine's eyes gazing directly into his. The older Paulsen turned slightly, showing his hands, still bound behind his back. His fingers moved slowly, methodically. Nodgra system ... at least three days in hyperspace ... don't worry ... you will be safe.

Though the young Socorran was unsure of his father's plans, a sense of confidence swept through him. There was some unseen game being played out and Drake was not sure what or who was involved. He stepped away as the Coynite dragged the semi-conscious Corellian toward the hangar bays on the lower level. Hesitant, Drake paused, staring after his father, who was still detained by the Gamorreans. Abruptly, Parr'Sratt broke the silent gaze between father and son, herding the younger Paulsen into the corridor.

Two days later, Drake was still haunted by the coerced separation from his father. In the solitude of the lower gun turret beneath the freighter, he sighed, resting his head against the gunner's support chair. Alone in the cradle of the ship, he stared through the viewport, watching the wild spiralling lights of the vortex of hyperspace. Massaging his forehead and temples, Drake felt relieved to have this quiet moment. Since coming aboard the Seldom Different, Halbert was a looming specter over every action and word. Life under the abuse of Abdi-Badawzi, numerous other bosses, and a lackluster career built on failure had left an edge in Halbert. An edge that pushed him beyond simple disillusionment to the border of psychotic dementia. It was certain, especially in sober moments, that Captain Elias Halbert wished the Socorran harm and

was only waiting for the right opportunity to loose his caged violence on the nearest scapegoat. There was no way for him to lash out at the Coynite, not without serious and obvious repercussions, which left Drake as the only avenue for his aggression.

Drake hoped a peaceful journey in hyperspace might ease the tensions between them. It might have worked had it not been for a Jawa hidden aboard the freighter, who began tampering with the ship's systems, sabotaging everything from the air condition units to the waste facilities. Drake found evidence of the stowaway -- hidden food stores, unexplainable stockpiles of tools and equipment, even a discarded robe. But nothing convinced Halbert until the Corellian went to use the facilities and the unit malfunctioned, flooding Halbert and the crews' quarters with raw sewage.

Abruptly, the threads of light beyond the viewport began to retract, becoming the telltale points of stars and planets. Without warning, the Seldom Different dropped into realspace. Startled, Drake slammed into the firing controls as the freighter bucked and lurched through the untimely transition. Lying dazed on the deck plates, Drake gasped, his bruised lungs struggling for air. Almost immediately, the proximity alarms began to blare.

"Paulsen!" Halbert's harsh voice crackled across the intercom. "Get up here! Fast!"

Breathless, Drake struggled to his feet. In the corridor, he heard the raucous Corellian swearing a steady succession of insults and curses. Rushing into the forward cabin, the urgency of Halbert's voice and the reason for the Corellian's distress became quite clear. Through the viewport hovered an Imperial Star Destroyer, blocking their path. For Drake, it was his first, up-close view of the Imperial menace sweeping through the galaxy. Sixteen hundred meters of gun turrets and docking bays, laser cannons and shield generators, the enormous battle fortress was an inspirational abomination of advanced technology. Staring over Halbert's shoulder, Drake read the data screens, determining that through accident or intent, the Star Destroyer crossed their hyperdrive coordinates, tripping the deactivation safety built into the drive system.

Halbert turned away from the flight controls, a malevolent mask of fury apparent in his face. "Sit!" he spat, pointing to the navigator's chair just opposite and behind him. Obediently, Drake sat down and was silent.

"Unidentified YT-1300, this is the Inquisitor," came the broadcast over the internal speaker. "We are reading your signature as the Seldom Different. Stop and prepare to be boarded."

Halbert's face blanched. "Boarded?" he hissed. Then over the comm, he said, "Confirmed, Inquisitor. This is the Seldom Different. We were on route when our hyperdrive detected you crossing our coordinate plane." His voice was steady beneath the strain. "If you don't mind, we'll reset and be on our way."

"Negative, Seldom Different," came the firm reply. "Any attempt to leave this area will be viewed as an act of aggression."

"He's powering up portside turrets," Drake whispered, reading the sensor screens. "And there are at least a dozen smaller ships moving toward us, fast."

The Coynite mumbled a brief comment, checking his own sensor screens.

Halbert groaned. "TIE fighters."

Resigned, Drake leaned into the acceleration chair, feeling the rapid canter of his heart. "Unless the Empire has been granting heavy weapon permits, it might be a good idea to hide any blasters."

Halbert bolted up from his chair, frantically unbuckling his blaster belt. "Hide everything!" he shouted, close to panic. "There's a bandoleer of power packs in that cabinet. Get rid of them too!"

Drake jumped at the order, unmoved by the harshness of Halbert's voice. He sprinted out of the forward cabin, taking the power packs with him, singly motivated by the implications of Imperial law, which frowned severely on illegal weaponry among its citizens.

Like his father, Drake was fond of the YT-1300 freighter and had spent much of his childhood wandering through the conduits and ventilation shafts of such ships. Though the models tended to change with each new improvement, the maintenance ducts and tunnels remained the same. Crawling through a narrow hatch, Drake removed the ceiling plate and scrambled inside the shaft. The stench from the backed up waste disposal system was overwhelming and he gagged, coughing on the fumes. Through tearing eyes, he found the object he was searching for, a built-in tool bassinet, where engine mechanics often

stored contaminated tools. Recalling an old smuggling trick from Ancher, he tripped the shield housing around the box. If the boarding party brought a scanner aboard, the sealed box would deflect any probe, permitting a clear reading.

"They're sending a shuttle, kid," Halbert shouted over the intercom. "Make it quick!"

"Done," Drake replied, jumping down from the vent and replacing the panel.

"Get down into the cradle and stay put!"

Drake hurried to the entrance of the gun pit. Sliding down the ladder, he listened as the sound of the pressurized hatch in the rear of the freighter began to open. Leaning against the interior wall, he listened to the pace of Halbert footsteps as the Corellian hurried to meet the boarding party.

Curious about their Imperial guests, Drake risked a quick glance out of the turret chute. "Stormtroopers," he whispered. He saw seven of the Imperial soldiers, their immaculate white and black trimmed armor glaring in the harsh interior lights of the corridor. Among them, a gray-suited officer arrogantly straightened his shoulders. It was difficult to maintain a cold and calculating pose, considering the Corellian stood taller than the officer and most of the stormtroopers.

"Look, Lieutenant Taggert, we have no cargo," Halbert said, feigning a mused Imperial citizen.

As they spoke, Drake watched in horror as several more stormtroopers descended the boarding ladder. "I can't believe this," he whispered in defeat.

Abruptly, one of the stormtroopers spotted him and charged toward the pit. "Halt!"

"Wait!" Halbert screamed defiantly. Drake was surprised at the courage in his voice. "He's just a kid," Drake heard the Corellian explaining to the disgruntled officer, who accused him of hiding criminals aboard ship. "I told him to wait this out in the lower turret. You know how kids get in the way, asking questions and mouthing off."

Drake smiled, genuinely impressed with the smuggler's performance. He clearly interpreted Halbert's warning to stay in the turret like he was told and kept quiet. When the stormtrooper descended into the pit to investigate, he found Drake sitting in the gunner's chair, staring into space.

"This is 37," the stormtrooper reported. "I've got the boy in the lower turret."

"Confirm, 37," came the reply. "I have another one in the bridge. The ship's clear."

Drake had never seen an Imperial stormtrooper in the flesh. He found himself fascinated by the lore that surrounded the Galactic Empire's specially trained fighters. Unestablished rumors claimed that they were more machine than human, nameless except for an identification number. According to the nomads of Socorro, who were fond of testing their mettle under extreme ordeals, the stormtroopers were subjected to excruciating chemical torture to remove all the hair from their bodies.

Drake shivered with the thought, involuntarily turning to stare at the stormtrooper, who was ready to meet his inquisitive eyes.

"Problem?" the stormtrooper demanded, the muzzle of his blast rifle level with Drake's chest.

Drake averted his eyes immediately, cursing himself. "No, sir."

"Who asked you to speak?" the stormtrooper spat, driving the rifle into the boy's chest. Deftly, he brought the butt of the rifle across Drake's chin, knocking the young Socorran from the gunner's chair. "I think you'd better come with me."

Sullen, Drake rose to his feet, wiping blood from his nose and chin. Eyes narrow with suspicion and injury, he realized that he was in no position to argue with an Imperial-issue blast rifle. He climbed to the top deck and waited for the stormtrooper to follow him.

"Hands on your head, scum!"

Drake did as he was told and walked into the forward corridor, which led to the bridge. The muzzle of the blast rifle felt wedged against his spine, but he did not resist.

"What happened?" Lieutenant Taggert demanded, letting the date registries and ship's logs fall to the floor. His skin was pale, nearly gray, a thin set of lips blending into the ignoble angle of his chin. Propping his hands and arms behind his back, the Imperial officer drew his thin frame into a straight line.

"On a bantha's hairy ... what'd you do?" Halbert snapped, desperately trying to sort and compile the scattered datapads on the floor. Behind him, two stormtroopers held the Coynite at gunpoint.

Drake stared defiantly at Halbert, then at the Imperial officer. "I looked at him." By the frightened expression that crossed Halbert's face, he quickly realized the venom in his words. Abruptly, he felt the rifle against the back of his knees. Startled, he collapsed.

"Is this true?" Taggert asked. "You struck him for looking at you?"

"No, sir," the stormtrooper replied. "I was forced to strike him when he pulled a weapon."

"What?" Drake cried.

"Weapon?" Halbert screamed, tearing at his matted hair.

"Silence!" Taggert demanded. "What weapon?"

"In the turret, sir. I removed him from the area before he could regain the weapon and fire on me."

"Where is the weapon?"

"Here, sir," replied another stormtrooper. "After 37 removed the prisoner, I retrieved it from the turret." He gave the blaster to the officer.

Taggert sighed, pursing his thin lips. Momentarily, they disappeared and his face seemed a perfect mask of smooth flesh. "You do realize that carrying an illegal weapon is a crime punishable by death?" Taggert straightened his

shoulders. "Assaulting or attempting to assault an Imperial agent is a crime punishable by execution," he paused, "on the spot!" Abruptly, he grinned, a pleasant smile crossing his face. "What do you say to the charges, young man?"

"It's not mine," Drake whispered.

Undaunted, Taggert said, "I'll ask again."

"It's not mine!" Drake snapped.

"Kid!" Halbert screamed. Without delay, he was silenced by three stormtroopers, who raised their weapons to his temples.

"My man is lying?" Taggert baited.

"I didn't say that," Drake replied, realizing his situation. "I said the gun wasn't mine."

Overhead, the ceiling plates rattled, dislodging debris. The stormtrooper guarding Drake stepped back and fired a volley into the upper deck.

"Wait, wait, stop!" Halbert screamed, as the other stormtroopers took aim and joined the fire.

Agilely, Drake dodged sparks and molten circuitry that fell to the deck. He was careful to keep his hands on his head, as he pressed himself against the far wall to avoid being burned by blast debris.

"Cease fire!" Taggert demanded, calmly turning his scowling face toward Halbert. "Either you begin explaining what's going on aboard this ship or you'll be joining your young friend on charges of treason and conspiracy to commit acts of treason."

"All right," Halbert reneged. He stared up into the exposed ceiling, wincing at the damage to the ship's components. "Squig, if that's you, get down here now!"

Perplexed, Drake listened and waited. Briefly, a chaotic cloud of chatter erupted from the darkness above the ceiling panels.

"I don't care if you were fixing the air ducts, get down here now, before I decide to space you!" Reaching up to capture the meter-tall collection of rumpled brown robes, Halbert set the Jawa down on the deck plates. Instantly, the creature began chattering at the Imperial officer and the perplexed squad of stormtroopers.

"What is it?" Taggert demanded. He gasped at the repugnant aroma saturating the desert scavenger. "What's it saying?"

Halbert grinned, gaining an edge over the situation. "It's a Jawa and he says your blasters need repairing." He hesitated. "Squig says he can fix them for 300 credits each."

Abruptly, Taggert's mood darkened. He glared at the insipid Jawa, at Halbert, and then at the Coynite being held at gun point by his stormtroopers. "Tell me, Halbert, what makes a man forsake his own kind to live among," he glared at the Coynite, "monsters? Doesn't the company of your own species satisfy you, or is it some perverted urge that keeps you among the inferior varieties of the galaxy?"

Another stormtrooper walked onto the bridge. Saluting, he said, "Sir, the sensory probe sweep is complete. This ship is clear."

Taggert returned the salute. "Very well, prepare the prisoner. We're leaving."

"Prisoner?" Drake coughed. Despite the maturity gained through numerous adventures with his father, he felt the sting of tears. "You can't!"

"Whoa!" Halbert blurted, forgetting his place. "You can't really take a kid in ... on those kinds of charges?"

The Coynite stirred from the wall, mumbling and gesturing toward Drake.

"Right," Halbert laughed nervously. "The kid saw an Imperial Destroyer, stormtroopers, first time in his life. He spooked. That's all. Look at him!"

"I am," Taggert pondered aloud, then he stared at the blaster in his hands. "I suppose ... if I could only make an example ..." He aimed the blaster at Drake, then slowly pivoted until the muzzle faced the Coynite.

Shocked into reaction, Drake lurched for Taggert's hand. "No!" he shouted. One of the stormtroopers also reacted, firing a quick burst. Though he was moving to the side, Drake was not fast enough to escape the bolt, which blistered its way into his right shoulder, charring the flesh and muscle beneath the impact. Driven by the force of the blow, Drake slammed into the corridor wall, feeling a rib give way beneath the stress on his body. He fell to the floor, writhing in agony as the pain washed through him. Alarmed by the scent of scorched flesh, the Jawa bolted, vanishing into an access maintenance tube.

Handing the blaster to his nearest escort, Taggert stepped over Drake's body. "Captain Halbert, by order of the Galactic Empire, as a representative of that order, I declare you are free to go on your way." The stormtroopers congregated behind him. Hesitating, the Imperial agent paused, turning toward them. "How do you say," his face brightened, showing the first signs of color in his cheeks, "ah, clear skies." Without further comment, the boarding party returned to the rear of the Seldom Different, backtracking to their shuttle the docked corridor.

The sounds of the repressurized seal echoed through the corridor.

"Sratt!" Halbert spat. "Reset those coordinates."

The Coynite ignored him, kneeling beside Drake.

"Put the kid in my quarters and get back here," Halbert demanded. "I need you on the bridge." Pointing an angry finger at Drake, he hissed, "You're not going to last in this business, kid. Who told you to get out of the cradle?"

"I was in the turret," Drake said weakly, as Parr'Sratt gently helped him to his feet.

"Hurry up with the brat, Sratt." Halbert stormed onto the bridge, briefly whispering, "I need a drink." He threw open the cabinet and retrieved a bottle of Corellian ale before vanishing into the forward flight compartment.

Parr'Sratt helped Drake into the captain's quarters, settling him into a narrow bunk. The Coynite smoothed the blankets up to the trembling boy's waist and then unzipped the flight jacket to examine the wound. An obvious frown

crossed his face. Taking a medpac from the surgical kit, the Coynite gently tapped it against the wound, steadying Drake as the boy winced in pain.

When the intense burning sensation began to subside, Drake felt the Coynite move away from the bunk. He heard water being poured. Though he was not certain, Drake swore he saw Parr'Sratt spit into the cup before reaching into a satchel and sprinkling a strange powder into the steaming water. Faint from the medication, Drake began to drift off.

"Lom," Parr'Sratt whispered. "Lom."

Drake awoke, startled.

The Coynite nodded, pressing the cup to his lips. "Lom," he said with pleasure.

Drake frowned. "Lom?" He stared into the unfamiliar face, feeling unnaturally at ease. "Only two people in the galaxy call me by that name," he paused, "my father and ... and you don't look like Karl Ancher. How?"

"Lom," the Coynite repeated, forcing the youngster to sip from the cup. "Lom'Ka'Sol."

With his face wrinkled in a horrible mask of displeasure, Drake swallowed the hot concoction, surprised to find it similar to the biting edge of Socorran raava. He turned to the Coynite. "Lom'Ka'Sol? What does that mean?"

"It means out of the cradle," Halbert replied from the doorway. "He's probably cussing you out for not listening to me and nearly getting us all killed." The Corellian was already drunk. "Sratt, I can't set the damn astrogation system. Somebody moved the nav computer." Staggering into the corridor, he howled, "Squig, when I get hold of you!"

Gently, Parr'Sratt covered Drake with the blankets. "Lom'Ka'Sol," the Socorran mumbled, drifting into a deep, deep sleep.

"Sratt!" Drake awoke with the Coynite's name on his lips. Glancing about the room, he noted the familiar interior design of an outdated YT-1300 light freighter. "The Miss Chance?" His sensitive ears heard the quiet hum of the ion drives, but there was a characteristic hiss that Drake recognized as a

modification his father had worked into the engines. He chuckled softly. "It is the Miss Chance."

Wincing against the pain and stiff muscles, he pulled himself from the bunk. Drake carefully glanced at the wound beneath his shirt, surprised to discover it was nearly healed, the scar tissue beginning to blend into the surrounding skin. Instinctively making his way to the bridge, Drake paused outside the forward cabin. Smiling, he watched his father toiling over flight readouts, puzzling over galactic charts and astrogation coordinates. The handsome bronze face held a vague familiarity, but it was haunted with worry. Grinning, Drake cleared his throat.

"Drake," Kaine gasped. "What are you doing up?"

"I heard the engines," he replied, using his good arm to embrace his father's neck. Despite the burning sensation of his wound, he felt a warmth that went much deeper, there in the safety of his father's arms. "How long have I been out?"

"Three days."

"Where are we?" Drake asked, stiffly sitting down in the co-pilot's chair.

"In orbit above Tro'Har." Kaine punched up the coordinate plane, visually displaying their location in relation with the nearest celestial bodies.

"In the Elrood Sector? Near the planet Coyn?" Drake probed. "You know that Coynite," he accused, "the one that Badawzi sent with Halbert and me?"

Kaine leaned into the plush upholstery of the acceleration chair. "Parr'Sratt is an old, dear friend of mine." Sighing nostalgically, he added, "He brought you here before heading back to Socorro with that slug Halbert."

"A friend? And he works for Abdi-Badawzi?"

"Abdi amuses Sratt," Kaine laughed. "He gets money, ships, a place to sleep ... just to stand around and glare at people."

Drake hesitated. "What does Lom'Ka'Sol mean?"

Kaine faltered. "Why do you ask?"

Indignantly, Drake replied, "Because you and Ancher have called me Lom, ever since I was a baby, and now some Coynite that I've never seen calls me by that name."

"Is that so unusual?"

"Toob never called me Lom," Drake argued. "Not even Abdi called me Lom."

Sighing, "When Sratt first saw you, he was overcome," Kaine said, his pleasant face darkened by the memory. "It was all he could say. Over and over and over again." Taking a deep breath, he explained, "Lom is the Coynite word for freedom."

"When did he ever see me?"

"When you were born," Kaine answered, nervously pulling at his lower lip. His eyes were dark and distant. "You spent the first few hours of your life in a Coynite warrior's bare hands." Sadly, he whispered, "While I stayed with your mother, until she," Kaine stammered over the memory, "... until it was over." Blocking out the recollection, he added, "Lom'Ka'Sol literally means freedom from the cradle law or out of the cradle."

"That's what Halbert told me."

"I doubt Halbert knows anything about Coynite tradition or the Cradle Law," Kaine said, "which prohibits male Coynites from owning land, taking a wife, even disobeying their fathers." He leaned forward, ruffling Drake's hair. "That is, until the male Coynite comes of age or comes out of the cradle."

Hesitant, Drake asked, "Have I come of age?"

"Parr'Sratt must think so," Kaine replied. "The Ka'Sol makes it official. In his eyes and the eyes of other Coynites, you are a man, not tu'pah, a child."

"What about Chu'la?"

Kaine laughed, his natural charm returning. "When pronounced la'chu, it means little fox. Chu'la means cunning, little fox, the fox who cannot be

caught." He smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "It's a pet name Sratt uses for me." Twisting around, he opened a hidden plate on the floor, handing Drake a holster. "Old Toob gave me hell for letting my boy run about town with a sporting blaster."

"Then you know," Drake whispered, thinking about the dying smuggler.

"Yeah," he replied. "You better strap that on, we're about to break orbit."

Admiring the heavy blaster and the custom designed holster, Drake probed, "Strap it on now?"

Kaine toggled the flight switches, boosting power to the ion drive. "We're going back to Socorro."

"What? But, Badawzi ..."

A serious look of concern fell over Kaine's face. "Remember where you come from, Drake. Socorro is your home, by birthright. You carry it here." He tapped the leather pouch at Drake's breast. "Doesn't matter where you set your coordinates. Besides," a coy smirk traveled across his face, "aren't you forgetting something?"

Drake frowned, desperately searching his scattered memory. "Saw Toob. Went to the tavern. Saw Anchor," he whispered. "I didn't pay the docking fee ..."

"Drake!" Kaine laughed playfully. "It's nearly winter. Certain volcanic basements will start filling with underground water and --"

"The Steadfast!" Drake cried. "It's still hidden in the Doaba Badlands!"

"Now what do you say about Abdi-Badawzi?"

Determined, Drake strapped his blaster belt around his waist. "Abdi," he grumbled, prepping the astrogation system, "better keep his distance or he might find himself doing business offworld."

Waiting for the hyperdrive cue to wink on, he proudly whispered, "Spoken like a true rogue."

When the Domino Falls

"Kaine!" Karl Ancher's voice boomed over the shrill whine of a defective exhaust rocket. Anticipating trouble, technicians and tourists paused to watch, snarling the flow of traffic through Omman's hectic starport.

Beside him, Drake Paulsen flinched, startled by the harsh quality of the Corellian's voice. Embarrassed by the sudden focus of attention, the 15-year-old Socorran groaned, covering his face with the wide, black collar of his desert duster. Ahead of them, he recognized his father's lean figure, framed by the battered hull of their freighter, *Miss Chance*. The outdated YT-1300 sat alone on a private mooring dock, shadowed by the mammoth starport generators.

Shirtless except for a hand-tooled leather vest, Kaine Paulsen's lean, muscular frame glistened with sweat. A repulsorlift cargo bed full of unmarked crates sat beneath the freighter's hull where he had left them. "How are you, Lom?" he asked playfully, using Drake's Coynite name.

"Ancher's on the war path," Drake whispered. "What's going on?"

Troubled by the haunted rings beneath his son's eyes, Kaine whispered, "Don't worry," affectionately caressing Drake's neck and shoulders. Then he coolly met the Corellian's ruthless gaze. "Ancher. I've been expecting you. Thanks for bringing Drake along."

Cold recognition fluttered in the old smuggler's eyes. "Damn right you've been expecting me! If you thought I was going to stand by and watch you make the biggest, dumbest mistake of your life, then you don't think very much of me, Kaine Paulsen!" Gathering his wits and his breath, Ancher snapped his fingers in Kaine's face. "I didn't waste my time and learning to see you go soft on refugees trying to homestead on some miserable, forgotten rock! *Lofahchu ets pyroni vyoryn viske!*" he grumbled, slipping into a dialect of Old Corellian.

Kaine laughed suddenly. "Loyalty is a smuggler's worst vice?"

Ancher's face exploded with violence. "The worst! And don't you forget it!" Silver-white hair crowned Ancher's handsome face, which was well weathered by a lifetime of scars and wrinkles. Dark eyebrows arched above his eyes,

mature, green eyes, clouded by mild regret. Piqued, he crossed his arms over his chest, as if shielding himself from a blow to the heart. His foot tapped querulously against the metal docking plates, an irrefutable sign of the smuggler's agitation. Despite the furor of incoming and outgoing spacecraft about them, Drake could hear the distinctive drone of Anchor's cybernetic leg, synchronizing with the Corellian's foot.

By sharp contrast, Kaine's handsome face, so deeply tanned by the Socorran sun, was smooth and flawless, radiating good charm. Unruffled by the Corellian's temper, he whispered, "Anchor, those people on the Thrugii outpost need food, medical supplies, and anything else I can think of to help them ..."

"Those people need a serious psych-eval!" Anchor spat. "Anybody who thinks they could make a living on that forsaken rock is crazy! And any fool smuggler who would deliver goods, encouraging them to stay, is even crazier! How much are they paying you?"

"Nothing right now," Kaine whispered, chided by his mentor and friend. Cautiously, he added, "But when the mine gets started, they offered ..."

"When the mine gets started? Kaine, that rock's already killed seven generations of miners! Do you really think ..."

"Damn it, Anch! I'm not some kid you picked up on one of your smuggling adventures. I'm a man, a father," he brushed a reckless brown curl from Drake's face, "And a damn good pilot."

"If those claim jumpers would make peace with the sector authorities, they could get their own pilot and leave you out this mess."

"You know that would never happen," Kaine said quietly. A trio of Imperial stormtroopers walked past, briefly observing them. "The sector authority has that planet locked down tighter than a Coynite chastity belt!" he whispered, cautiously observing the stormtroopers "That's why they need a smuggler and a good one." Kaine recognized the explosion escalating in the old man's eyes. "Anchor, I don't need your permission to make this run!"

"You don't need my permission?" Anchor's face flushed several shades of crimson. "What about those money-hungry sector officials? The ones who claim the rights to Thrugii, the asteroid belt and even the open spaces in between. What about them, Kaine?" The Corellian propped his hands on his hip, visibly shaken by the Socorran pirate's tenacity. "Even Abdi-Badawzi ..."

"Let's leave Abdi out of this, shall we?" Kaine frowned with with mention of his arch-rival, the Twi'lek crime lord who ran Socorrco's illicit underground.

"Besides, he's too busy filling his own pockets to bother with exploiting a humanitarian cause."

"Listen to me, Kaine!" Anchor snapped. "You're ruffling the wrong tail feathers this time. Those private owners have money, political leverage, mercenaries; they might even have Imperial connections You don't want this one, boy."

Suddenly, his face softened as he attempted to change his approach. "You've got a good heart, Kaine You're a better man than me to even think about this run. But you better think long and hard about the folks you're crossing and what what you stand to lose." Gently, he ran his fingers through Drake's hair clucking the anxious boy beneath the chin. "Swallow your pride. Loyalty is the worst vice a smuggler can fall into."

Cradling Drake against him, Kaine whispered evenly, "Maybe, Corellians think that way, but Socorran integrity goes too deep for that garbage. I wouldn't expect you to understand." He hesitated, stumbling over the insult. "It's just an excuse for not getting involved, and why? Because there's no money in it!"

"Drake, scratch a little gravel," Anchor growled, his eyes intent on Kaine's face.

Wanting nothing more than to stay between them, Drake hesitated. His father smiled, soothing reassurance into his rigid shoulders. "How's your Wookiee?" he asked.

Startled by the question, Drake stammered, "My Wookiee?"

"There's a problem over by the guard house. Go see if you can help them out," he whispered, pushing Drake away. "Ask for Seth." As he moved away, Drake glared at Anchor holding the Corellian solely responsible for the tension threatening to divide his loyalties.

"Go on," Kaine persisted.

Reluctant to leave either of them, even the cantankerous Ancher, Drake walked toward the port entrance. "Are you so eager to make your fortune?" he heard Ancher hiss with venom. "What about the boy?"

"Drake understands," Kaine retorted, "just like his mother."

"That little girl twisted you up good, didn't she?" Ancher barked. "She didn't make her final jump soon enough to please me!"

"You don't mean that."

"Damn right I mean it!"

"Watch your mouth, old man!" Kaine sputtered, fists balled against violence. "If you hadn't tampered with the hyperdrive ..."

"I told you that drive was unreliable! How was I supposed to know she'd birth the boy right there on the deck plates! I didn't tell her to get on that ship with you. She knew the risks and the consequences!" From a distance, Drake watched them arguing. Since early childhood, he had lived aboard ship with his father, flying the trade routes and learning the dangerous thrill of smuggling. When not accompanying his father, the young Socorran had spent his free time in strategic mental games with Ancher, plotting Kessel Runs and cheating smalltime ganglords. He knew each man intimately, familiar with their moods and eccentricities.

There had been other explosive quarrels between his father and the overly protective Corellian that were tantamount to similar arguments between Kaine and Drake. But none had ever gone so far as to merit insult. Frustrated, Drake thrust his hands into his pockets, powerless to stand between them and their dominant personalities. Not even the familiar silhouette of the *Miss Chance*, docked beyond them, could comfort the immeasurable sense of foreboding that threatened to consume the anxious boy.

Sullen, Drake moved out of the hangar arena, stepping up to the port entrance where the guard house was situated. Barely large enough to contain a full complement of staff, the small, one-room structure offered a quiet place for

the port guards to rest between shifts. Drake approached the group of armed men gathered outside. "I'm looking for Seth," he whispered.

"That'll be me," huffed a portly, human man. He stared into Drake's face with focal intensity. "Aren't you Kaine Paulsen's boy?" The security director grinned astutely, sweeping his gaze from side to side. "Do I need to ask? You look just like him. Do you understand Wookiee?"

Drake shrugged absently, catching a quick glimpse of his father and Ancher still arguing by the *Miss Chance*. Though the dock was barely 10 meters away, the continual echo of blast rockets and welding equipment drowned out their voices.

"Come on in and whatever you do, don't spook," Seth cautioned, moving his stout body through the narrow bulkhead that framed the blast door. "Stay calm and move slow."

Before Drake could question the peculiar directives, he felt a blast of hot air escaping from the small compound. With horror, he realized that it was not a breeze, but a voice, booming from the back of the room. Dodging several projectiles, the young Socorran backtracked, falling into Seth's waiting arms. "Now steady on there!" Seth scolded, shielding the boy against the wall.

Perplexed, Drake realized that Seth was not speaking to him directly, but to the figure standing only meters away from the blast door. A formidable 2.4 meters tall, muscles twitching beneath a deep layer of black fur, the territorial Wookiee dropped to one knee. As the muzzle leveled off at chest level, Drake could see that the bowcaster was set and fully charged.

"Tell him to put the gun down!" Drake cried.

"He's a she, young Paulsen," Seth laughed. "And besides, you're the expert. You tell her to put the gun down."

Drake straightened his coat, moving away from the guardsman's support. "She should understand Basic," he whispered nervously. "Don't you?"

The Wookiee bawled insufferably. It was a sound that Drake could only translate as intense loneliness and abandonment. "She's scared." The reaction

to his translation was immediate; relieved to be understood by someone, she propped the bowcaster against the chair, openly explaining her desperate situation. "And she's hungry."

Seth scoffed, "What does one feed a Wookiee?"

Drake approached her cautiously, reaching into his pocket for his last protein bar. "Easy," he soothed, offering it to her. "It's not much, but we can get you more."

Her face brightened, silver highlights showing at her brow and nobly set cheekbones. Framed by a mixture of black and silver fur, her opaque blue eyes were cloudy with exhaustion and sorrow. She took the bar, gingerly sniffing at the contents. Drake delighted in the momentarily contact, feeling the smooth warmth of her shaggy mane against his hand. Bawling in a sedate voice, the Wookiee moaned and returned the dehydrated bar.

"No, you can have it," he assured her, nervously taking that moment to ruffle the fine, black fur beneath his inquisitive fingers. Intrigued, the boy stared up at her, admiring the silver accents that swept through her neck and arms, down across her broad shoulders and over her back. "Where'd she come from?"

"Space tramp dropped her off here," Seth replied, settling his heavy frame into a chair by the door. "Tells me to find transport for her. He emphasized safe transport and hauls 24 cases of Corellian ale into my office to make sure the job gets done."

Drake whistled, impressed by the payment. "Why the trouble?"

"Evidently the old man's hyperdrive was ready to implode, sending him, her, and most of his crew into the final jump with a bang!" He clapped his hands together. "According to him, the Wook held the drive together with nothing but a few pins, a little Jawa snot, and an emperor's ransom of good luck. Old man claims his hyperdrive hasn't run that well in over 20 years."

"So you're a tech, huh?" Drake teased the Wookiee.

She shrugged, gingerly biting into the ration bar. Almost immediately, her nose wrinkled with the bitter taste. As hunger won out over reluctant appetite, Drake watched in fascination.

"Why's she offworld?"

"Her folks smuggled her out," Drake replied, listening to her strained voice, "shortly after the Empire took over Kashyyyk. She's been on the run ever since."

"I guess so," Seth chuckled deeply, "what with the bounty being offered for free Wookiees."

With mention of a bounty, the Wookiee bellowed fiercely, snatching her bowcaster and anything else she could grasp as ammunition. Dodging an assault barrage of tin cups, storage containers, and power packs, Seth flipped over, shattering the chair beneath his substantial bulk.

"Nikaede!" Drake scolded gently, prying a smoke grenade from her large hands. "He was kidding." Scowling at the security official, he demanded, "You were kidding, weren't you?"

"Honest, Wook!" Seth grinned, remaining under the table. "No love for the Empire here."

Successfully retrieving the grenade, Drake asked, "What have you arranged?"

"Transport to Tatooine."

"Mos Eisley?"

"It's an agreeable atmosphere," Seth grunted, struggling to his feet. "And if she's really a good tech, I can set her up working modified ships out of port."

"Tatooine's a good place to hide," Drake whispered. "No Imperial paperwork. And if you're handling ship modifications for smugglers, no one will bother, not even tracers." Then, reminded of the seclusion that often plagued him, he selfishly added, "But I know an even better place. You could come back to Socorro with me." The Wookiee yowled inquisitively. "My dad's the best pilot in the business, but an average technician. He could use a good mechanic."

Nikaede howled immediate appreciation, sweeping the young Socorran into her massive arms. Feeling his rib cage bending beneath the Wookiee's might, Drake croaked, "Sure Nik, we just need to figure a way to get you offworld."

"Leave that to me," Seth almost sang with great ceremony.

"Boss!" crackled a voice over Seth's comlink. "Boss!" Briefly, the sound of blaster fire echoed outside the door.

"Stormtroopers!" Drake cried, recognizing the distinctive pulse of Imperial-issue weaponry. Quickly taking the bowcaster from the chair, he stowed it beneath a pile of discarded flight suits. "Stay calm," he whispered to Nikaede, pinning the Wookiee between himself and the wall.

Rattling like predatory teeth against the metal, white-armored fingers forced their way through the blast door. Visibly stunned, two starport guards slumped to the floor. "I'm in command here," Seth's operatic voice boomed. "By whose authority ..."

Outflanking each other, the stormtroopers hurried into the room. Their squad leader marched through the blast door, violently thrusting his rifle into Seth's sternum. "This station falls under the jurisdiction of ..." his voice trailed off, shocked into silence by the Wookiee and the boy standing in the back of the compound. Two other stormtroopers stepped into the room, flanking the walls. "Cease your fire!" the ranking soldier screeched, as they leveled their weapons at the Wookiee. "You might hit the boy."

"Yes, you might indeed hit the boy," Seth grumbled. "And cause an incident that would take millions of credits to hide. Not to mention embarrass your superiors ..."

"Quiet!" The stormtrooper moved away suddenly, then returned, thrusting his rifle butt into the security official's chest. Drake was helpless to act as Seth collapsed to the floor. "You!" the stormtrooper pointed to Drake. "Where's the permit for that animal?"

"Permit?" Drake piped, his voice raising an octave higher than he expected.

Breathless, Seth groaned, "The boy hasn't got a permit. What do you expect? His uncle only purchased the creature a few moments ago." He pointed to the stacked cases of Corellian ale in the corner. "I was acquainting the child with commands and important hygiene instructions. There's no crime in that." The security man hesitated, staring at the stormtrooper. "Or is there?"

"What's going on here!" demanded a gruff voice.

"Uncle Ancher!" Drake whined. Mustering all his energy for a childhood tantrum, the boy cried, "Uncle Ancher, tell the soldiers. You bought the *chumani* for me! They want to take her away." Silently imploring Ancher to play along with the ruse, he added, "You won't let them, will you? After you paid for her. Twenty-four cases of Corellian ale is a lot, isn't it, Uncle Ancher? That's what you told me. You said nothing was worth 24 cases of your Corellian ale, not even an Imperial bribe ..."

"*Koccic sulng!*" Ancher spat to silence the insipid prattle. Despite the rough indignity of a blaster rifle wedged against his spine, he turned on the stormtroopers, feigning a disgruntled Imperial citizen. "Since when did the Emperor allow his forces to traumatize children and helpless animals!"

"This creature belongs to you?" the squad leader demanded.

"I bought her for the boy, his *chumani*." He hesitated, staring into the soldier's unreadable face. "*Chumani*, gentlemen, is Old Corellian for *companion*; or so I've been told." Ancher leaned toward the stormtrooper, whispering, "Come, come man, have a little compassion. The boy just lost his mother day before last." Pulling a chit of credits from his pocket, he straightened, saying, "I understand there is a question of tariffs to pay, permits..."

"All licensing takes place at the Bureau of Customs. You will accompany us there immediately."

Ancher hesitated. "I see," he sniffed, glaring at Drake. "Lead on my good man."

Though the presence of stormtroopers was a common phenomenon on Omman, a culturally diverse planet, the presence of a Wookiee, a boy, and an older man being herded between a squad of Imperial soldiers proved to be

something of a spectacle. During the brief walk across the starport intersection, the stormtroopers pressed through throngs of curious tourists who stumbled across their path. Never breaking formation, they led the prisoners through the narrow streets and into the Bureau of Custom's antiseptically clean front station.

An Imperial clerk was sitting behind a spacious desk as they were brought into the building. "Hold please," he snarled, never bothering to glance up. Drawn into a long frown, his gnarled, haggard face wore the unpleasant expression of overwork and general dislike for the public.

Safely eclipsed by Nikaede's shadow, Drake leaned against Ancher, whispering, "Did my dad get off the dock?"

Cautiously, Ancher hummed impatiently, nodding positively to acknowledge his request, while effectively getting the Imperial clerk's attention.

"What can I do for you?" the agent asked in a low nasal tone.

"These people need to register an exotic animal," the stormtrooper replied, shoving Ancher toward the desk.

"Type of animal?"

"A Wookiee," Ancher growled.

"How will the animal be used?" the clerk continued, punching the necessary codes into the datapad. "Concubine. Laborer. House servant. Hunting. Breeding stock."

"*Chumani*," Drake replied.

The Imperial agent looked up, managing to glare down his protracted, irregular nose. "A *chumani*?"

Ancher curbed his temper and whispered, "A companion." Then glaring at Drake, he added, "A child's companion."

The clerk rolled his eyes, exasperated, then scanned the datapad before him. "That will be 1,000 credits for a temporary offworld permit. Vaccinations,

physical examinations, and temperament adjustments are extras. Do you wish to ..."

"No."

"Then that will be an additional 500 credits."

"But I don't want the vaccinations or..."

"The fee is not for any of those services. It's a calamity insurance surcharge."

The adjutant began formatting the temporary registration, officially notarizing the documents with the Imperial seal. "If the animal should get loose and injure someone, you'll be partially covered."

"If the animal gets loose, you won't have to worry about injury!" Ancher snapped. "You'll be dead, along with anybody else fool enough to get in a Wookiee's way."

"Ancher," Drake cautioned him. The Corellian relented, retrieving the credit chit from his pocket.

"Thumb imprint here, please," the clerk directed, handing the datapad to the irascible tourist.

Drake stifled a protest, recognizing the personal identification unit. Designed to tap into a galactic reservoir of information, the mechanism granted access to background data, criminal records, or military status. Though Ancher's reputation among peers was a topic of envy, worthy of emulation by would-be smugglers, his record as a galactic felon was, without exception, on the verge of legendary proportions. The young Socorran felt faint with the realization that one imprint would lead authorities and bounty hunters right to the Corellian.

Casually reaching up to scratch his ear, Ancher pressed his thumb against the sensor pad, throwing Drake a mischievous grin. Almost immediately, the machine beeped in protest, unable to register the print. "That's the third time today!" the clerk hissed, snatching the datapad from the civilian. "We'll have to do it manually! Get their names," he snapped at the nearest office aide.

"No need," another officer cooed in an even baritone. Approaching from the rear, an Imperial official entered the front room, followed by an entourage of stormtroopers. Obedient to the snapping of his fingers, all the stormtroopers raised their rifles, targeting the subjects at the desk.

"Colonel Veese!" the clerk gushed, finding himself in the line of fire.

"Talk about being put on a hurt vector," Ancher hissed through a half smile.

The Imperial straightened, his tall, thin figure framed by broad shoulders. Sparse insignia, pinned with meticulous regard, betrayed an insidious nature. "His name? Karl Mathieu Ancher. Homeworld? Corellia. Age? Oh, I'd say 57 years. Occupation? Illegal trafficking of controlled commodities." Thoughtfully, Veese slapped a leather thong against the polished sheen of his boots. "The data from his criminal record could disable or destroy the processing systems of a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer."

"Colonel Weasel!" Ancher grinned, purposely mispronouncing the name. "After all these years, you still remember me. Boy, meet an old friend of mine, Colonel Weasel." He winked, "By the way, Weasel, how's that pretty wife of yours?"

Still indignant with the Corellian's illicit affair with his then newlywed bride, Veese balled his fist, striking the smuggler in the mouth. Stunned by the officer's sudden violence, the stormtroopers were slow to react, closing to restrain Drake and the Wookiee.

Temper in check, Ancher recovered, rubbing his bruised jaw. "Well," he spat blood on the polished floors, "still meaner than a rancor with a bad tooth."

"Lt. Criss," Veese addressed the clerk, "every purebred hound has fleas. I want you to meet one of mine." Arrogantly, he took the identification pad from the agent's slack hands and rubbed the sensor face against Ancher's coat. "Watch very carefully Lieutenant," he warned. "You're about to learn a very important lesson; a critical lesson every successful smuggler inherits from his mentor." Veese snapped his fingers, waving his hand toward the Corellian. Two of his stormtroopers shouldered their weapons and grasped Ancher's arms, restraining the smuggler between them. "When processing any type of

background information, never take your eye off the suspect. Never let them touch their eyes," he wiped at his narrow eyes, "their ears," he scratched inside his ears, "or behind their ears. Don't even let them touch their mouths or noses." Rubbing the thin layer of ear wax and grease across the surface of his thumb, he pressed it against the sensor pad. Immediately, the machine beeped inconclusive results. "Any type of oil or waxy residue will disable the scanner and without knowing it, you could give important documents to a known galactic felon."

"I had no idea," Criss groveled, fearing repercussions.

"I wouldn't expect you to," Veesele replied snidely, wiping the grease from the disabled scanner. He pressed Anchor's thumb against the clean surface. "I spent the whole of my junior grade tracking down this and other scoundrels, learning the tricks they employed." Gloating, the haughty officer whispered, "There's a terrible price to be paid by the hunter who, in order to be successful, becomes very much like his prey."

The ID sensor blinked erratically, correlating the processed information. Criss examined the garbled muddle of codes and the returning message. "This could take some time," he whispered. "We've been experiencing some interference with the signal. If there's any information, it should arrive by morning."

Veesele's face darkened. "Until then," he hissed, "I want him held."

"And the boy?"

"I'm staying with you, Anchor," Drake whispered, glaring at the Imperial officer. "Nikaede?"

The Wookiee bawled, delivering a scathing insult to the stormtroopers as they cautiously moved toward her.

"If only a third of the Emperor's citizens would show the loyalty found among these criminals, the Rebellion would have been crushed years ago. Take them to the holding cells," Veesele directed. "I'll return in the morning for Karl Anchor. As for the boy and the Wookiee, you may deal with them in any way you wish."

Veesle and his armed entourage retreated into an adjacent section of the Bureau. Wary, the Bureau security guards herded Drake, Ancher, and Nikaede into a separate passage, leveling their weapons primarily at the Wookiee. "Well ain't that a heinous thing to say to me?" Ancher grumbled. Avoiding the low bulkhead, he walked into the darkened cell. "I've been called many things in my time, but never a flea."

A glow rod ignited in the cell. "That's 'cause everyone knows, it's the old fleas that make you scratch the worst." There was laughter from the dark rim beyond the light.

Ancher spun slowly, shielding Drake behind him. "I know that cocky snicker." Throwing a restraining hand against the defensive Wookiee, he whispered, "Tait? Tait Ransom?"

"None other," the smuggler said slowly, offering his hand to the Corellian. "Bad to see you, Ancher. Never figured you to do time in an Imperial lockup."

"Drake, come over here," Ancher beamed, moving into the light. "This here is the best damned smuggler I've ever had the chance to cheat." The aging Corellian winked playfully, elbowing the boy in the chest. "The only man with guts enough to even rival your pop."

Drake shook the stranger's hand, marvelling at the raven black hair that flowed in thick waves around the handsome face. Dark skin framed even darker eyes, casting an odd, swarthy aura over a lean, powerful figure. He was older than Drake, perhaps a bit younger than his father, surrounded by the ageless atmosphere of a man used to living on the edge. "This is Nikaede," he introduced the Wookiee. "What are you doing here?" Ancher demanded.

"I just got nominated to a hard-time academy. The blackheads caught me lifting some there special gear. Armor. Weapons. The expensive stuff." Ransom shrugged nervously. "They're shipping me off to Vizcarra."

"The Imperial prison planet?"

"Yep," Ransom whispered. "And here I sit, picking my nose hairs, with half of my crew docked across the street, waiting for me. By dawn, my co-pilot will figure I got snuffed on the job and will jump planet."

"Tait," Anchor scolded, "ain't like you to be caught without a plan. What happened?"

"This happened," Ransom replied. He threw a cylindrical object toward him.

"Or rather it didn't happen." Anchor deftly caught the personal transponder in his hand. "When the Imperial armory alarms went off, that transponder was supposed to alert my back-up team." Frustrated, he whispered, "Somehow it got busted in the shakedown and without the signal, the Boys in White tracked us down faster than old Jabba could lay claim to a debt. No backup, no chance, no way out."

"Where are they?" Drake asked timidly, staring around at the empty cells. "The other half of your crew?"

Ransom pursed his thick lips together, handsome, even the midst of a frown.

"Permanently retired, kid. Since I was the leader, they kept me alive to make an example."

"Can't you fix it?" Anchor questioned, examining the unit.

"If it were a ship's transponder, I could fix it, change it, make it sing the Republic anthem." Ransom shook his head, as a few dark strands fell into his eyes. "That thing? I haven't got a clue."

"Can I see that transponder?" Drake took the unit from Anchor, handing it to the Wookiee. "Can you fix it'?"

"Hold on now," Ransom protested.

Drake silenced him with a dismissive gesture. Holding the glow rod over a nearby cot, he watched Nikaede pull the delicate leads through the top section. Yowling to herself, the Wookiee began to inspect each wire, sniffing out the defective cord. She carefully disconnected a stray cable, making a rough assessment of the damage, then promptly set about wrapping the wire around the lead heads, continuing to peel the housing apart. "Tait," the

Socorran boy whispered, "you better help her. I don't know much about transponder codes. She's afraid she might alter the signal."

Moving beside Ancher, Drake leaned against the scuffed plastishield enclosure. The cell wall was constructed of a clear plastic fiber, reinforced with antiquated steel bars that had been welded against the structure. The old smuggler's eyes were distant and stony, seeing nothing beyond the darkness. "Whatcha thinking, Ancher?"

The Corellian sniffed, a smile playing across his lips. "I was just thinking of all the stupid stunts I've pulled in my lifetime. All the suicidal runs, the friends I made ... and enemies," he growled, frowning suddenly. Then the characteristic smirk returned. "And of course the ladies," Ancher sighed nostalgically. "You know, when that report comes in tomorrow, there could be enough warrants against me to total 300,000 credits." He hesitated. "I used to think that was a mark of distinction."

"What changed your mind?"

"The value of life, Drake. The value of my life." He ruffled the boy's hair. "And the few people I care about."

"Is that why you and my dad argued today? You're worried about him?"

"Drake, I don't agree with what your father is doing. He's asking for too much trouble, bad trouble." He averted his gaze. "The same kind of trouble that started this bad blood between me and that Imperial stiff. Somebody tried to warn me, telling me it wasn't worth it, not for one night with a pretty gal." He shrugged, eyes clouding with the memory. "But at the time," he whispered, conjuring a mental image of the young woman, "it certainly seemed worth it."

"He only wants to help those people, Ancher."

"What will he prove? What will he have when it's over, if he survives."

"He won't know that until it's done." Drake hesitated, hearing his father's bitter tone in his own voice. "Ancher, you've been living on Socorro all these years and you still don't understand. Maybe a Corellian smuggler could look the other way, but a Socorran smuggler can't. It goes against our nature."

"That's what your father said!"

"Because there's a difference, Ancher. You call it pride. I call it honor." Drake took a shuddering breath. "Why do you think bounty hunters avoid Socorro? Because you and others like you are protected by Socorran tradition, a tradition that kneels to no government, no authority, no law."

Subdued, the Corellian moved away, shielding the pride behind his eyes.

"Damned if you're not just like him."

Grinning, Drake replied, "Why should that surprise you?" Behind them, he heard Nikaede's low voice, miserably yowling defeat.

"You did your best, Wook," Ransom consoled, needing no translation to define her surrender. "Damn it!" he spat, roughly brushing his hands through thick, black hair. "There's got to be another way!"

"Ancher," Drake whispered. He leaned his head against the smuggler's chest.

"We can't stay here."

"We're not, Drake," Ancher soothed, cradling the boy against him. "Tait, we don't need that damned thing. Risking a few lumps, we could ditch this place and get to the starport."

"We'll take more than few lumps," Ransom chuckled. "They keep at least six armed security men and two stormtroopers overnight."

Staring up at the Wookiee, Ancher grinned. "The odds sound right about even."

Challenging Nikaede, he whispered, "Why don't you go over there to them bunks and show us how you feel about the Imperials taking over your homeworld."

Nikaede humphed inquisitively, inclining her head to one side. "We need a distraction, Nikaede," Drake explained. "Go on, show them how you feel about being locked up in here."

Howling a maniacal war cry, Nikaede threw a side kick, high and wide, smashing the exterior window and bending the bars beyond the building. Retractable climbing claws sprang forward, slicing walls and ripping through

bedding. Demolishing the small cell, she snatched at the bunks, easily ripping the bottom tier from the wall. For a moment, Drake thought the Wookiee had really berserked, watching pensively as she swung the cot over her head.

Ancher grabbed the young Socorran, pulling him into a safe corner. "Help!" he started shouting. "Somebody help!"

"The shag's gone bloody!" Tait screamed, slapping his hands against the cell wall. "You plastic heads get me out of here!" He flinched visibly as Nikaede grasped the top bunk tier and yanked, shattering plaster and cement as she ripped the bolts from the floor. Summoned by the alarmed voices, four guards and a stormtrooper burst into the cellblock, brandishing weapons.

"She's berserk," Ancher said calmly. "It happens when they get penned up like this."

"You idiots put her in here!" Ransom screamed. "Get her out before she comes after me next!"

"10-33, Code Blue," the stormtrooper reported over the comlink. "Get them out!" he snapped to the security team.

Accessing the keypad, the sentry opened the door, pulling Drake and Ancher out of the cell. As the other stormtrooper and the remaining sentries rushed to the scene, another guard grabbed Ransom by the sleeve, forcing the smuggler behind the security team and out of danger. Storming the deranged Wookiee, the first stormtrooper secured his rifle and fired a quick burst.

"No!" Drake screamed and lunged at the guard beside him. Swinging his fists in wide, controlled arcs, he managed to dislodge the rifle. The result was a wild ricochet that bounced off the corner wall before striking the Wookiee. Nikaede howled in pain as the bolt struck her shoulder and arm.

Dodging the stormtrooper, Ancher reached for the blaster rifle. But before he could accomplish his goal, the raging Wookiee snatched the rifle from the stormtrooper's frantic hands, breaking the weapon over his head. Shrugging off the singed burns, Nikaede roared, charging the door with the wrecked rifle locked in her grip.

Ransom leaped against the plasti-shield wall, unexpectedly rebounding onto the astonished guards. Beneath his flailing fists and elbows, two men fell to the floor unconscious. "Drake!" Negotiating a spinning back kick, he knocked the second stormtrooper into the wall. Unfortunately, as the stormtrooper fell, he took three of the other guards and Drake to the floor with him. Wrestling through a tangle of legs and arms, Ransom quickly grasped the stormtrooper by the head and twisted sharply, effectively breaking the Imperial's neck and removing the combat helmet.

Alarmed by the sight of Drake being held and beaten by the remaining guards, Ancher grabbed one of them from the floor, slamming his fist into the man's jaw and smashing his knee against another sentry's mouth. Nikaede swarmed through the guards with unmitigated violence, fracturing skulls beneath her fingers.

"I'm okay," Drake whispered, as she pulled him from the carnage.

"Rusty!" Ransom screamed into the commandeered comlink. He manipulated the signal transmitter. "Rusty?"

"Tait, we heard you got snuffed!" came the startled reply. "Where are you?"

"In the Imperial playpen across the street." Ransom chuckled. "Look, Rusty, I got a little Imperial hot foot."

"What's their ETA?"

Ransom stared at the alarm that tripped when the stormtrooper fired his blast rifle. "About 10 minutes for them to get here," he replied. "Five to figure out what happened and another five to start closing down the port."

"Acknowledged, I'll have Seth clear a path for us."

"Don't worry, my boys'll handle it," Ransom urged, ushering Drake and the Wookiee to the door. "Just run!"

They followed the outside walls of the Bureau jail, staying in the shadows. The streets were quiet except for a herd of distracted Ithorian tourists, who were examining a series of carbonite plaques displayed against the starport wall.

Darting across the street, they slipped into the port entrance, using the Ithorians to dodge a squad of stormtroopers running toward the exit signs, which led to the outside street.

Inside the hangar arena, Ransom recognized the portly security executive. Standing beside a security sealed dock that was reserved for port authority ships, Seth quickly motioned to one of his guards. He acknowledged the all clear sign from the Elomin and nodded, waving the fugitives into the massive shadow of the starport generators. Leading them into the inner recesses of the port docks, he scolded, "Tait Ransom, somehow you always seem to stir up trouble when you're around."

"I had a good teacher," Ransom replied, throwing an accusing look at Anchor.

Guiding Drake by the shoulder, Seth led them to Omman's government controlled dock. "I've relayed our emergency coordinates to your co-pilot. Here," he surrendered the bowcaster to the Wookiee. "Hopefully, you won't need this before you get off the planet."

"How is the traffic?" Ransom asked breathlessly, scanning the starport floor for stormtroopers.

"Clear," Seth reported. "So don't bother to declare your departure. The tower is aware of the problem."

"I owe you, Seth. We all owe you a big one."

"I'll expect a few cases of Socorran raava to arrive within the next 24 hours."

"Agreed," Anchor snapped, ushering Drake and the Wookiee onto the dock. "Even if I have to fly it here myself!"

The rotund security director bowed deeply, "Clear skies, gentlemen and lady." His shadow played against an adjoining corridor wall, then vanished in the darkness beyond the access tunnel.

"Come on!" Ransom hollered. An ominous Corellian gunship sat moored at the dock, locked tight and sealed for departure, except for the cargo bay. Sprinting

up the ramp, Drake tripped and slid across the polished floor as the pressurized seal began to close.

"Go, go!" Ransom screamed as the boy recovered. Bracing themselves across the interior hull wall, the fugitives struggled against the turbulence of the gunship's sudden liftoff.

"Where to, Boss?" Rusty's voice echoed in the empty cavern of the cargo bay.

"Socorro!" Ransom screamed over the wail of modified ion drives. The cargo deck plates rumbled violently beneath him as the gunship shifted to the side.

"Rusty, what's the update on traffic?"

"Seth arranged for a small diversion on the other side of the planet." The co-pilot's disembodied voice snorted mirthfully over the comm. "We have a free ride."

Exhausted, Ransom slid to the floor, holding his head between his arms and knees. "Yhew!" he exclaimed. "This ought to put a hefty price on all our heads." Turning to Drake, he ruffled the boy's hair. "Congratulations, kid, you just made the billboards."

* * *

Beneath the shroud, cloudless skies of his beloved Socorro, curled beneath his favorite woolen blanket, Drake shivered in the cold air blasting from the circulation vents. A drowsy smile curled over his lips as he lay against the pillows, reliving those exciting moments in the cluttered confines of his mind. Exhausted, he stretched beneath the warmth of his comforters, savoring the grainy sensation of Socorran sand between his toes. Nearby, he heard Nikaede's gentle snores and he sighed, wondering what new adventures tomorrow would bring for him and the overly sensitive Wookiee.

Momentarily startled, the young Socorran was fully awakened by Tait Ransom's charismatic voice, echoing from the main sitting area beyond his bedroom. Fumbling through the darkness, he stumbled over the sleeping Wookiee. Nikaede yawned, exposing a mouthful of glistening fangs. Rolling to her side, she embraced the bowcaster protectively against her chest and fell

back to sleep. Relieved, Drake tiptoed to the wall, easing into the shadows. As his consciousness sharpened, he focused on the whispered voices and heard his name, his father, and something about the *Miss Chance*.

"Are you sure, Tait?" Ancher groaned.

"I'm telling you, Ancher, as soon as we broke from hyperspace, we picked up his signal and followed it into the asteroid belt." Ransom growled irritably, forcing the words from his throat. "We kept getting closer and closer, until finally we were sitting right on top of the signal."

"He was hiding then," the old guard argued. "Some of those asteroids are enormous. You might have been sitting right on top of him."

"We were sitting on top of him, Ancher." Ransom slumped into a nearby chair, cradling his head beneath his knees. "On top and right in the middle. There wasn't much left." Distraught, he sat up, unable to shake the images of the gutted freighter, drifting through the erratic course of the asteroid belt.

Ancher closed his eyes, guarded against tears. "I told him not to go. Warned him there'd be trouble."

"What about the boy, Ancher?" Tait whispered.

"Drake?" Ancher gasped. Firmly shaking his head, he blurted, "I can't tell him. I ... I wouldn't know what to say."

Drake felt his heart clench, his chest tightening beneath his hands. "You don't have to say anything, Ancher," the young Socorran whispered. Forcing a breath into his lungs, he walked into the main room.

"Drake," Ancher cried, "I don't know ... sorry isn't enough, boy." Numb, Drake moved into the inner antechamber, avoiding Ransom's intense gaze.

"Drake," he heard the Corellian whisper, a note of command in his voice. Before Ransom could stop and reason with him, he snatched his boots from the outer wall and sprinted into the cold dawn. Socorro's ever intruding sands sucked at his feet, weighing him down as he raced up the face of the dune to the empty landing field beyond the compound. There were no signs of the

Miss Chance. Exaggerated by the ascending sun, the desert swells formed false mountain ranges against the stony surface of the planet.

Breathless, Drake sank to his knees, beating his fists into the sand. Raised on a gentle zephyr, a spray of sand sifted into his eyes, summoning immediate tears. "I won't let you go!" Drake screamed to the sun. "I won't let you go," he cried, surrendering to the embrace of the black sands.

It was eventide before Drake stirred. Stretched out on the sweltering sand, he lay face down with no shelter or shirt to protect his shoulders and back. His skin burned with intensity, inflamed by Socorro's unrelenting sun. Gritting his teeth, he endured this selfinduced punishment, a purification meant to burn the guilt from his heart, if not from his mind. Dazed by the extreme heat, the boy sat up, startled to find Nikaede sitting nearby on the dune.

Perched on the ridge, she seemed no more out of place than the sand, her black pelt blending into the Socorran landscape. Drake rose to his feet, wincing as the burns across his back pulled and twinged with every motion. Walking with deliberate slowness, he moved up the crest, momentarily staring into the Wookiee's eyes. Close to tears, injured both physically and emotionally, he sat down on the dune beside her.

Nikaede tipped her head back against her shoulders, howling in a low, mournful voice that echoed within her throat. Growing steadily louder, it was not an unpleasant sound and seemed to linger, reverberating against the dunes and the clear sky.

"Is that how Wookiees mourn their dead?" Drake asked, intrigued by the bizarre act. He listened intently as Nikaede explained how her people gathered by honor families, howling, wailing, even challenging death, to bring solidarity to the survivors. The grieving boy shrugged against the tightening burns across his shoulders. In silence, he listened to the names of Wookiee uncles and cousins, grandparents and playmates, marking them all in memory, as was the tradition. A little smile forced its way to his lips when the Wookiee howled an odd melody that vaguely resembled his father's name.

"Drake!" Ancher called. The Corellian appeared just over the dune crest. Behind him, Tait Ransom stiffly navigated the unsteady ridge of sand, leaving his landspeeder humming nearby on the desert floor. Sullen, the rogue smuggler paused self-consciously, staring into the young Socorran's face. Abruptly, he took Drake's hand, pressing a 1,000 credit chit into the boy's palm. "Before my old man took off for the other side of the galaxy, he put 1,000 credits in my hand and told me to go burn in a rancor pit." He shifted uneasily in the sand. "There was no love lost between us -- but that's the way it usually goes with those of us who run the shadows."

Shaking his reckless black mane, Ransom stared into the setting sun, as if gathering his courage. "I learned the runner's trade from Ancher. Right here on Socorro. I left to make a name for myself, outside the shadow of Kaine Paulsen. Don't much matter what the untold histories will write about yesterday, today, or tomorrow." He thrust his hands into his pockets. "I'll always be second best to him ... and you." Ransom chuckled, clucking the boy on the chin. "I don't have it in my genes to be the greatest pirate in Socorran history." He cleared his throat of tears. "They'll be watching you, Drake. Jabba, Abdi-Badawzi, from Nal Hutta to Tatooine, they'll have their eyes on you 'cause they want what you've got ... what your father had. Take that 1,000, it's a rough start, but that's the one thing we all have in common."

Staring at Ancher, Ransom forced a breath through his wide nostrils. "You were right to put ole Ancher in his place. There is something different about Socorrans, something that separates them from the rest. If it's heart, then go where your heart takes you, kid." The smuggler retreated, starting back down the dune to his vehicle. "Don't never regret what you've done or what you will do. And don't never look back." Ransom hesitated as he climbed into the landspeeder. "Clear skies, kid." Revving the engine a few times, he sped into the badlands, leaving a billowed, black cloud in his wake.

"He's a good man," Ancher whispered, moved by Ransom's gesture. "Not much of a pilot, but one feisty fighter." Cradling Drake against him, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

"I don't feel anymore, Anchor. There just doesn't seem to be any reason," he replied incredulously. "No cause."

"The only good cause is a dead cause, I'm afraid. It's the only kind that brings people together."

Staring across the darkening horizon, Drake asked, "Will I know my cause?"

"When the domino falls, it's every man for himself," Anchor replied. "When the time comes, you'll know it, boy."

Drake sank weakly to his knees. "But what if I make a mistake? What if I don't listen when I should? Take on a job that's too big?"

"Drake," the old guard smuggler chuckled softly, "making choices is all about making mistakes. Everybody's guaranteed to make a few. That's why they call it living." The smuggler shuffled away, leaving Drake and Nikaede alone with the coming night wind.

Staring into the expansive badlands, Drake contemplated Socorran traditions, whose intricate ties with the tragically short lives of pirates and smugglers left no room for dramatic ceremony. There would be no savage wild fires or elaborate rituals to celebrate the death of Kaine Paulsen. No moment of silence, not even a scream in the night, to commemorate the spirit of a dead pirate. There would just be memories, offworld memories, and hushed whispers of fallen glory.

Abruptly, the wind was still. For one tranquil moment, no grain of sand shifted. The ever-changing face of Socorro remained unchanged.

Then, as abruptly as it had ceased, the breeze swept in from the badlands, carrying a chill. "Nikaede, I need your help," Drake whispered. "I have to do something," he hesitated, "and I can't do it alone."

Nikaede pounded a fist against her broad chest, bellowing a staunch oath of fealty to the young pirate. As if daring the waning glory of Socorro's sun to challenge the integrity of her honor, she raised her bowcaster and uttered a tremendous war cry to the dimming skies. Intrigued, Drake grinned, whispering, "Was that a life debt?" His smile widened and a deep sense of

completion began to swell within him. Shaking the sand from his leggings, the young Socorran stood up. "Come on," he whispered and started walking into the ominous stretches of the Doaba Badlands.

It was nearly dawn when they reached the hidden entrance to the dormant volcano. Filtered sunlight illuminated the volcanic crown, sifting down through the darkness. In the basement hollow, the delicate rays faintly sketched the silhouette of a Ghtroc freighter. Moored on a modified set of strut supports, the radiant visage of the *Steadfast* stirred Drake's memories of late-night flight schedules with his father, prepping the ship for her first smuggling runs.

Intrigued by the customized renovations, Nikaede examined the quiet, exterior lines of the freighter, impressed with the power boosters jutting from the tail section. "You can play with the engines another time," Drake chuckled, guiding the mesmerized Wookiee toward the bridge. In the narrow corridor, he shivered as the cooler air aboard the ship blew over his bare skin. Pulling his father's flight jacket from the console, he shrugged the rough fabric over his inflamed shoulders and slowly sat on the edge of the pilot's chair. In the familiar interior of the *Steadfast's* flight cabin, he thought he could hear his father's voice, echoing starchart calculations and instructions.

"Go ahead," he chuckled, offering the co-pilot's chair to the anxious Wookiee. Leaning into the plush leather chair, Drake suddenly sat upright, feeling a discomfiting bulge against the small of his back. Reaching behind him, he felt the warm heel of a heavy blaster against his palm. "By all the moons of Nal Hutta!" Drake gasped, echoing one of Anchor's preferred expressions. Raising the blaster from its holster, he recognized it as Anchor's most prized possession, the only weapon to survive 30 years of the Corellian's dangerous lifestyle. Brought out for only the most auspicious ventures, the modified blaster was formidable, even without its power pack. "How did he know where ..." Drake grinned mischievously, knowing that the tenacious smuggler had ways of knowing everything that transpired above or beneath the sands of Socorro.

Beneath the blaster, inside the customized holster, Drake found an antiquated, personal datapad. Before the days of keypads and data-punch boards, the

obsolete instrument used a magnetic stylus to imprint information directly onto the dim screen. Perusing through the entries, Drake was astounded by the neat calculations and astrogation maps scrolling before him. Every route that Kaine Paulsen had ever explored and used for smuggling, from the most bizarre entries to the routine, were recorded there.

"These were the short cuts," Drake whispered. The last entry was a detailed schematic of the Thrugii asteroid belt. "Nikaede, what's on the cargo manifest?" he asked, staring blankly through the ship viewscreen. "Not the main cargo bay, ship's stores." Distracted, the Socorran stood up, strapping the blaster around his waist. "Six months of consumables? Emergency rations." Grinning roguishly, he ordered, "Realign the relays and set the proximity alarms to maximum. We'll need a constant-active sweep to avoid the sector authority sensor tags."

The astute Wookiee recognized variations in the codes, modifications radically opposed to the normal coordinate planes of space. Shrugging, she input the peculiar heading and barked to her captain, adding a sharp yowl to punctuate her inquiry.

"Yep, we're going to the Thrugii outpost," he replied.

Listening to the gentle whistle of the *Steadfast's* engines, Drake toggled the lift controls, guiding the freighter through the narrow crown of the volcano. Socorro's sun met them at the rim, throwing an acute glare across the unsullied hull, as the starship sped across the dark shadow of the Doaba Badlands. "Bring up the running lights," he ordered, "all of the them, including the search beacons."

Profiled by her exterior running lights, the *Steadfast* banked sharply below the skyline, speeding over the uneven mounds of the Doaba Badlands. Brilliantly illuminated search beacons crisscrossed the land of Kaine Paulsen's birth in a silent tribute, heralded only by the thunder of the freighter's engines. As the *Steadfast* sped over the external flight pad outside of Ancher's home, Drake caught a glimpse of the old Corellian waving a glow rod in the darkness, signaling the traditional wish for clear skies.

Nearly imperceptible against the first glances of dawn, the *Steadfast's* shadow faded quickly as the freighter abruptly ascended into the red and yellowed atmosphere above the planet. Drake Paulsen kept his eyes on the open space before him, harboring no regrets as the shadowy face of Socorro dissipated beneath him. Finger poised over the hyperdrive cue, he activated the system, instinctively, without thinking and without looking back.

Calibration Check

Corwin Shelvay stood in an empty engineering laboratory at the Ansarra Rebel base. Shelvay examined the brand new unit, just delivered three days ago. It certainly was expensive-looking; the fully-equipped model came with an atmospheric sample analyzer and draught-proof casing around the sample receptacle. The device was so new that there were still pieces of packaging littered about the work bench where it has been placed.

Shelvay looked quizzically at the figure given on the unit's digital read-out. He paused for a while, falling deep into an old Jedi meditation. After a while, the unit's digital readout began to fluctuate wildly.

A technician, with a surprisingly unhurried demeanor for a Rebel tech, walked past, and Shelvay stopped him.

"Excuse me," said Corwin, the Rebel base's resident Force sensitive. "I hate to be the bringer of bad tidings, but this unit is giving faulty readings."

Looking puzzled, the technician studied the readings. "Sorry, sir, but I don't see any variance with base standard readings."

Corwin smiled calmly and replied, "They are between point one and point three per cent too high."

"What are you talking about? We calibrated it using the manufacturer's own control group!"

"Yes, that's partly what caused the problem. The gram mass only weighs 0.9999973 grams, and the milligram mass only weighs 0.99822 milligrams. The other standards are also out."

The technician was becoming annoyed. He was not a great believer in the Force. "You're kidding," he said.

"I'm afraid not. I think you should check the unit's calibration again."

"Yeah, sure." *That's only a level ten diagnostic routine that'll take two hours, but who cares, right?*

After a moment the harried technician added, "Hey, wait a minute. The scale's circuitry should have picked up on that. It should have *told* us that at least one of the masses was out. I'm sorry, Commander, but I don't think it's likely that this unit is wrong. I mean, we're using it as a standard for the entire base, and we've already had to re-calibrate half the other scales on the base."

Raising an eyebrow, Shelvay responded with a simple, "Really?"

Shrugging, the technician was inwardly pleased to have this unwanted problem solved. "Stranger things have happened, sir."

"You're saying that scales that have functioned perfectly well for years on end suddenly appear to be significantly out of adjustment?" Corwin asked.

"Yeah ... Are you saying its fault-detection circuitry is out too?" *Here we go again*, the technician winced inwardly. *He's going to say yes.*

"Yes, I am," replied the Jedi.

The technician had had just about enough. "Oh, really? Well, this is the most accurate analyzer on the base. Just exactly where did you weigh the standard masses to ten billionths of a gram?"

Trying to look innocent, Corwin shrugged and said "Ah, there are ways ..."

"Such as?" The technician was still suspicious of the Force-user, and was starting to remember the base scuttlebutt about Corwin's abilities.

"You don't have to take my word, of course. Why don't you check for yourself?"

The technician remembered the story that some of his fellow engineers had told in the mess hall that morning. Something about Shelvay purifying all the air in a bottle and knowing within a thousandth of a gram exactly what was in it. *And here I thought I could relax.* "I'll check it at once, Commander," he sighed.

"... and now, not only is the Imperial Navy faced with greater and greater challenges as the treasonous Rebel Alliance becomes more experienced in matters of space combat, but the forces of Emperor Palpatine are continually forced to combat pirates in petty skirmishes throughout settled space. And these groups are no longer the rag-tag cutthroats of a few decades ago; they are seasoned combat veterans with a fierce hatred of the Empire. The Navy has its work cut out for it."

— Excerpt from Kaelldin Krothburt's Study of the Galactic Balance of Power: The New Order's Greatest Challenges. DataLine Press, datapad entry 542.21, Dx#4/R2P format (restricted government access only).

Constant Spirit

"We really must leave, Your Highness." The dance music being played by the distractingly attractive Zeltron band in the cantina nearly drowned out Gorhan's words, but even if Leia hadn't been able to hear him, the solemn expression on his tanned and weathered face would have gotten the message across.

The young Senator Organa checked the time yet again, the gnawing feeling in her stomach worsening. "Rafe Ballon is one of our most reliable agents." And a friend of Father's, she added silently. Not that it could afford him special treatment. "If he isn't here, it has to mean something happened to him. Can't we give him a few more minutes?"

Gorhan appeared uncomfortable about his answer, but resolute nonetheless. His determination to give her bad news even when he knew she wouldn't like it was one reason she kept him around. That and the fact that he was practically the size of a Wookiee. "I'm afraid not, Princess," he said. "We've already stayed too long. If anyone were to find you here..."

"I know, I know." Leia shook her head. She wasn't supposed to be in this sector at all; her ship's official flightplan listed only a diplomatic visit to Duro, keeping this side trip to the nearby planet Quellor a secret. They had landed here under false names with a forged manifest. She was still new to solo missions, and the

plan was to be planetside just long enough to rendezvous with Rafe and retrieve the tactical information he had for her. Anything longer than that was dangerous, especially for a still-inexperienced operative. Gorhan was right.

But that didn't mean she had to like it.

"Fine," she said, trying not to sound like a sulky teenager - even if she was one. She pulled the hood attached to her pale blue gown back up over her head. "Let's go."

They left the cantina and made their way through the twisting streets of Quellor City in the direction of the spaceport, an alert Gorhan leading the way, looking from side to side with small, precise movements that contrasted with his hulking build. It was minutes past dusk, the dark of night just beginning to settle on the city's ornately spired buildings, and the temperate air smelled sweetly of the katella flowers that were famous in this region. Despite the Imperial presence that hung over the place like an oppressive fog, it was a lovely setting, and for a moment Leia wished she could simply appreciate her surroundings.

But only for a moment. She wasn't one for wishes.

Her senses twinged and she whirled around just as a hand reached out and grabbed her upper arm. Gorhan's blaster was already in the other man's face when they both realized it was Rafe, huddled in the doorway of what appeared to be a residential building, the collar of his jacket pulled up to hide his features as much as possible.

Gorhan muttered a curse and lowered his sidearm.

"Rafe!" Leia said. "What..."

"Princess." Rafe's gray eyes darted from side to side; the short, slim man was as nervous as Leia had ever seen him. "Moff Toggan is onto me. Somehow he found out that I'm the one who's been slicing into his systems." He held out a datacube in a shaking palm. "Everything I've collected to date is on here. Troop movement schedules, security protocols, everything you need from this sector. Take it and go."

"But what about you?" Leia protested. "If they catch you, they'll kill you." Or worse, she thought queasily.

"I'm already dead." Rafe said it with a shrug, but Leia could see that his effort at nonchalance was failing. "Leia," he said more seriously, and she had a sudden flashback to him discussing strategy in her father's study, his expression increasingly somber with each new glass of brandy. "I've always known this was a possibility. Take the cube and don't worry about me."

Leia's mind reeled, refusing to accept what he was saying. "Don't be ridiculous. You're coming with us."

"Your Highness..." both Rafe and Gorhan began at once. Gorhan glared at the small, wiry Rafe, who subsided. "We can't take him onboard," Gorhan continued. "If they know he's with the Rebellion, and he gets connected to you... It's too much of a risk."

Leia knew, at least intellectually, that her escort was right again. But she couldn't bring herself to agree this time, while Rafe looked at her with death in his eyes. "I know all about the risks," she said, summoning her best tone of royal command. "My entire life is a risk. And I'm not going to let anyone die who I doesn't need to." She looked at her father's friend reassuringly and repeated, "You're coming with us."

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Gorhan shaking his head; she ignored him, keeping her gaze on Rafe.

The spy swallowed hard, then sighed. "Thank you," he whispered. "But if there's even a hint this is going to go wrong..."

"How about we quit talking about it and move," she said. The three rebels took off in the direction of the Constant Spirit, none of them noticing the smell of katella blossoms or the stars beginning to appear in the night sky.

* * *

Despite the collective nervousness of everyone onboard, the Constant Spirit left Quellor's airspace without difficulty. Seated in the cockpit of the compact light freighter with her pilot and navigator, Leia allowed herself a glimmer of hope that they would leave the planet as unobtrusively as they had arrived.

But shortly after they left atmo behind for the vacuum of space, emergency klaxons started blaring. Should have known we wouldn't get off so easy, Leia thought.

"A single Imperial Customs corvette approaching," reported the pilot, Minna. "They're hailing us."

At least the Moff hadn't had time to send more ships after them. Yet. "Let's hear what they have to say," Leia said.

Minna nodded, and a moment later a clipped male voice filled the cabin. "Attention Constant Spirit, this is Captain Task aboard the Gatekeeper. You are transporting a known spy. Surrender him at once and we will spare your vessel."

Right. She was young, but she wasn't stupid. "I'm afraid we don't know what you're talking about, Captain," Leia said, keeping her voice as even as possible. Her heart pounded in her chest. "We're shimmersilk merchants who were delivering a shipment to a loyal client in the capital."

"Whoever you are, you're in league with the Rebellion," Task said. Leia felt a pang of relief that he at least didn't know her identity. Their aliases must have held up under inspection. "Turn over Rafe Ballon or we will fire on your ship. I will give you one minute to respond." The communication ended.

Rafe appeared in the opening to the cockpit. "Let me turn myself in," he said. "You can't allow one person to jeopardize the mission - not to mention the danger this puts you in."

"Minna, begin evasive maneuvers," Leia said, not looking back at him. "Youk, how soon until we can jump to lightspeed?"

The Mon Calamari navigator consulted his screen. "Six minutes, Your Highness."

That was at least five minutes longer than she'd like. "Gorhan?" she said into the comm.

"Already in place, Princess."

Good. The Constant Spirit only had one gun, the better to make it appear a peaceful merchant vessel, but Gorhan would make the best of it. "Fire at will. And everybody hold on."

"I never should have come onboard," Rafe said. He slammed his palm against a bulkhead in frustration.

"You might want to sit down," Leia told him. No sooner were the words out of her mouth than her stomach lurched as the ship went into a steep climb. Rafe stumbled and put his hands out to keep from slamming head-first into the cockpit's opposing bulkhead.

"Like I was saying..." Leia murmured. The ship rocked again, this time from a laser blast, snapping her head back. Rafe threw himself into the chair beside her and strapped himself in.

"How are we doing?" Leia asked Minna.

"Hanging in for the moment, but I don't know how long our deflector shields are going to hold up under their attack." As if on cue, the ship shuddered ominously. Minna blew a black curl of hair out of her face as she checked her console. "Just what I was afraid of: shields are fading fast," she said grimly. "Down fifty percent already."

"Gorhan?" Leia asked.

"Doing what I can," he responded. "Their shields seem to be holding better than expected."

"Naturally," Leia said under her breath. "Youk, how are those calculations going?"

"It'll still be a few more minutes, Your High..." He ended with a yelp as another blast rocked the ship. "My apologies."

"It's all right, Youk," Leia said, trying to sound calm. "I know you're doing what you can." Despite her tone, her mind was racing. If this mission failed, it would reflect badly not only on her, but on her father. She was determined not to let that happen.

Then again, if she wound up dead, it probably wouldn't matter much to her either way.

"Just got in a good hit!" Gorhan shouted. "We'll have them on the run yet!"

Leia grimaced. They must really be in trouble if Gorhan was pretending to be optimistic.

With the next impact against the hull, Minna spat a curse. "Shields are gone," she barked. "I'm doing what I can, but if something good doesn't happen fast..." The ship banked hard again as the pilot tried her best to continue to evade the larger craft.

Leia looked over at Rafe to solicit his advice, but the man was breathing loud and fast, almost as if he were having a panic attack. He looked back at her, and his gray eyes revealed his agony. "I can't do this anymore," he said.

He pulled off his safety harness and ran out of the cockpit.

"Where are you going? Rafe!" Leia considered going after him, but the ship shuddered again and she stayed put. She'd have to deal with him later.

Another hit, and alarms started blaring. "That last blast took out the hyperdrive," Youk said in dismay. "And disabled the alluvial dampers."

A pit opened in Leia's stomach. "I think we're in trouble." She bit her lip, wondering what her father would do in this situation. Not get himself into it in the first place, most likely. "For now just keep trying your best to outfly them, Minna. And Gorhan, keep barraging them with gunfire." And I'll try to come up with something brilliant.

"Guess now we find out if my best is good enough," Minna said. She was gripping the yoke so tightly that the brown skin on her knuckles was turning white. Leia reached over to squeeze the other woman's shoulder.

"Senator, something's happening... We've lost our escape pod," Minna said in confusion. "It just launched by itself. Youk, check to see if it's a malfunction."

The Mon Calamari pressed a few keys. "It doesn't appear to be, no."

"Rafe," Leia said with a gasp. "It has to be. But what is he doing? Turning himself in?"

A moment later, the pod came into view, headed directly for the Imperial ship - more specifically, the Gatekeeper's bridge - and as they waited, the pod made no indication of changing course.

"I don't believe it. He's going to ram them," Minna said breathlessly.

"Can you open up a comm channel to the pod?" Leia asked.

"I'm trying, but he isn't responding," Youk informed her.

Leia moaned. How would she ever explain this to her father?

"It's as crazy a plan as I've ever seen, but if it works, he just might save our skins," she heard Gorhan say.

Everyone in the cockpit seemed to be holding their breath as they watched the pod make its way toward the larger ship. The Gatekeeper, presumably intent on finishing off its more important quarry, didn't take action against the pod until it was too late. The ship began to turn and fired its main gun, but both last-ditch efforts failed. Rafe's pod found its target well enough, ramming into the bridge in a spectacular conflagration.

A death bier, Leia thought.

Completely disabled, the Gatekeeper listed to one side aimlessly, looking almost pitiful as it floated in space like a ghost ship. But there was only one lost soul for which Leia grieved.

Gorhan appeared in the cockpit opening, his bulk blocking out all light behind him. "Whoever's left onboard is going to have bigger problems than us to deal with now. We owe Rafe a debt."

"Yes," Leia said, her voice rough. She closed her eyes, willing herself not to cry. She couldn't let her crew see her that way, like a lost little girl.

After a long moment, Minna cleared her throat. "What are your orders, Senator?"

"Take us to the closest non-occupied planet," Leia said wearily. "We'll arrange for either repairs or transport."

"Yes, Your Highness."

The crew of the *Constant Spirit* was quiet for the remainder of the trip.

* * *

Leia told her father about it when she returned to Alderaan, wanting to deliver the news in person. She sat in his plush, expansive office, where she had spent so many hours while she was growing up, and haltingly explained what had happened. She expected Bail Organa to be angry, or frustrated, but instead he was just sad.

"I'm so sorry," she said, not for the first time since she'd sat down. "I can't help but feel that this is my fault."

"Rafe knew the risks of his mission," her father said. He stood in front of the picture window, his back to her as he stared out at rolling green hills and a bright blue lake that twinkled in the sunlight. "He was prepared to die for the Alliance, and he did. As a hero. There are worse ways for a man to die."

"But he didn't have to," Leia said stubbornly, wincing at how young she sounded even to her own ears.

"He didn't?" He turned to look at her. "What could have gone differently?" he asked, more gently than she expected. "What would have saved both the intelligence we needed and the rest of your crew?"

"I don't know," she said, bowing her head. "But there must have been something. I didn't think fast enough..."

"You can't save everyone, Leia," Bail said. He sat down next to her on the couch and took her hand in his. "Your feelings do you credit, but war requires sacrifice. A sacrifice we all must be willing to make." He squeezed her hand. "You can't save everyone," he repeated.

She squeezed back, glad he was there, taking comfort in the familiar warmth of his skin. But his words nagged at her. "Maybe I can't always save everyone," she conceded. "That doesn't mean I shouldn't try." She raised her chin defiantly.

His dark eyes showed his doubts, but he smiled at her anyway. "You wouldn't be you if you didn't," he said.

They sat together until a servant called them to dinner, heralding the end of another day. There was always tomorrow.

"You should know better than that. Rob 'em blind, that's my kind of revenge."

— Han Solo



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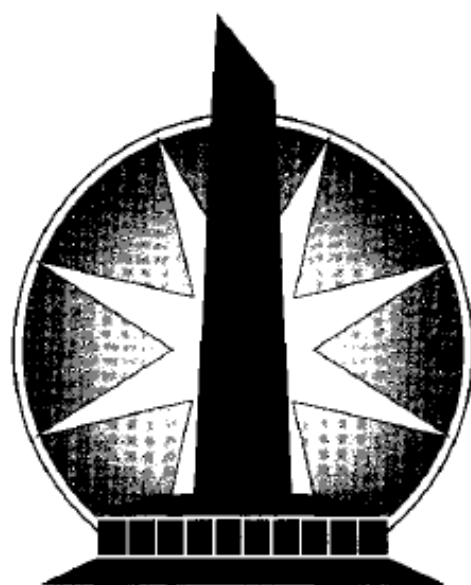
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Viceprex M. Hirken, Corporate Security, Corporate Sector Authority



To: Lady Chawcroft, Special Projects Consultant, Imperial Correctional Facilities Ministry
From: Ilm Vaz-Weplinn, Assistant-Deputy Viceprex of Security, Corporate Sector Authority
Subject: Correctional Facility Plans

My Lady,

We here have been most grateful for the continuing cooperation and assistance your offices have provided us over the past few years. Dare I say that relations between our respective organizations have improved considerably since you have assumed the mantle of your esteemed, late "superior." Do give his wife my condolences, by the way.

What I wish to discuss is an interesting proposition that concerns both of us. It has come to my attention of late that there has been some discussion regarding the budgeting of your Ministry and the Admiralty's constant demands to establish their own penal facility to avoid further incidents such as the "Corellian affair."

I appreciate the delicacy of such negotiations, but I feel that our research may offer a means of preventing such problems in the future. Our feasibility study suggests a radical departure from existing designs for correctional facilities. One that would absolutely guarantee no escapes, riots or uprisings.

I am sure you would be interested in such a plan. Of course, prototype simulations would have to be funded. Allow me to transmit the findings to you. If they are amenable, then perhaps negotiations could begin to allow a subcontracting deal ...

Your Correspondent,
Ilm Vaz-Weplinn

To: Ilm Vaz-Weplinn, Assistant-Deputy Viceprex of Security, Corporate Sector Authority
From: Lady Chawcroft, Special Projects Consultant, Imperial Correctional Facilities Ministry
Subject: Correctional Franchise Options

My Dear Sir,

I thank you for the kindness of your previous message. I have expressed your sentiments to the widow Gervruche and she is most grateful for your sensitivity.

Currently, Grand Vizier Postage is refusing to hear the Admiralty's request for an additional prison facility, so on that note your thoughts were greatly appreciated.

All of use in the Correctional Ministry are adapting to the new Minister. Those personnel incapable of changing with the times are being "reassigned."

To business then.

I have studied, at great length, the data that your office has kindly provided me with. I must say the idea is very intriguing to say the least. Certainly the construction and maintenance costs would be extraordinary, but in the long run, costs of food, equipment, staffing, and other vital areas would be dramatically decreased. However, the idea needs more study. I will be more specific in future correspondence, but here are my major concerns in brief:

1) Isolation. It has been our experience that the harder it is to get to a prison, the harder it is to get out of it.

2) Armament. Anti-spacecraft turbolaser emplacements would add a defensive capacity in case of attack.

3) Sustainability. In case of natural disaster or extended siege, the facility should be able to withstand considerable bombardment before rescue forces can arrive.

4) Population. At least 4,000 to 10,000 prisoners is an optimal goal for a prototype facility. The facility needn't be filled to capacity before an inspection tour can be arranged.

5) Equipment. A fully staffed interrogation facility is necessary. If you need any help, Lord Ritor can provide specific requirements.

I hope these changes are feasible for your design. Until I hear further ...

In His Majesty's Service,
Lady Chawcroft

To: Lady Chawkroft, Special Projects Consultant, Imperial Correctional Facilities Ministry
From: Ilm Vaz-Weplinn, Assistant-Deputy Viceprex of Security, Corporate Sector Authority
Subject: Stars' End Penal Facility

My Dear Lady,

I have submitted your report and the accompanying memo to my design staff. Partly inspired by your memo, they have begun simulation work in earnest. I am also pleased to say that the marketing department has come up with an appropriate code name for the project: Stars' End.

Unfortunately, due to recent reorganizations in my division, we have a new head of operations. I regret to say that my further association with the project shall be more limited for the time being. Viceprex Hirken, the new head, has decided to take personal control over the project and says he has high hopes of working with you on the product.

He has worked on a number of projects in Security and says he has the highest confidence regarding the franchise opportunities of Stars' End. Included are some memos with current cost projections.

I must say that I have greatly appreciated our correspondence in the past and hope to have further dealings with you in the future. Thank you for all your support.

Your Humble Correspondent,
Ilm Vaz-Weplinn

To: Lady Chawkroft, Assistant-Minister of Corrections,
Imperial Correctional Facilities Ministry
From: Viceprex Mirkovig Hirken, Security Division, Corporate Sector Authority
Subject: Stars' End

Dear Madam,

This is with regard to the current specifications for the Stars' End plant. Despite a few minor cost overruns, I am, as ever, highly confident about the construction. Your office has a standing invitation to come for a tour. Rumors of systems failures are just that — rumors started by disloyal members of my own staff. They have since been appropriately punished.

I have personally overseen every aspect of construction. The armoring on the main spire is the finest available in the galaxy. Far better, I dare say, than many military facilities. You see, since we here in the Corporate Sector are paving the way, as it were, it is only fitting that Stars' End be the finest prison in existence. Franchised facilities for the Empire can be considerably reduced in price, although the quality of the prison would understandably suffer.

Stars' End is so well constructed I have ordered a residence for myself and my wife, Neera, to be built at the top of the detention tower. By the way, perhaps you've had a chance to try the oonberry pie recipe she gave you at our anniversary banquet last year? She would love to hear you enjoyed it.

In any event, we shall be residing at the base, confident in our safety and security. I have even installed a Master Command Unit which allows me to take personal control of the entire facility in case any of the workers fail me in their duties. Have no fear, Stars' End is in the best of hands.

As for defensive systems, we have, at your insistence, added weapons batteries to the design (to be installed later; construction continues as I am writing this). I still don't see much need for them. Stars' End will be utterly impregnable to any attack. The power core has had to be expanded, but my technicians assure me that decreasing the overload shielding will solve the problem. They tell me there is absolutely no chance of an overload with all the redundancies they've built into the system.

We will be needing access to a Mandalorian dungeon ship when the facility is operating at full capacity, but that won't be for another few months. I'm sure your office can provide one soon to begin transport of our "guests." At my suggestion, the Security Police have created a list of occupants. I have ordered our forces to take the initiative: preventive crime-fighting as it were. There is a growing breed of unwholesome individuals in the Sector and we are doing our best to cull them out before they can damage the Sector's reputation.

Sincerely,
Viceprex Mirkovig Hirken,
Security Division,
Corporate Sector Authority

To: Lady Chawcroft, Minister of Corrections, Imperial Correctional Facilities Ministry
From: Ilm Vaz-Wepplinn, Viceprex of Security, Corporate Sector
Subject: The Mytus VII disaster

Greetings again, my Lady.

I am ever so glad to be able to correspond with you again. I only wish the situation were less tragic. I must thank you on behalf of the entire department. We are truly saddened by the loss of our esteemed Hirken. Your words of condolence were most kind, and I have shown them to all our staff in the Detention Taskforce. The reaction was most ... original.

However I can't help but feel that he would have wanted to go the way he did: supervising Stars' End. In many ways, he felt that Stars' End was his personal project. Who would have thought that a freak accident with his beloved gladiator droids would cause an overload spiral?

I somehow imagine that he and Neera realized it would only be a temporary setback for the Authority. I like to think of them together, nobly facing infinity. But, I know you thought of him the same way I do ...

The Direx Board was most gracious in naming me as chief of the Security Division and I thank you for your words of encouragement as well. I can understand the delicacy of this situation. However, the Empire should keep in mind that all funding beyond the feasibility study came from the Authority's coffers.

I genuinely feel the full opportunities of the project are still unexploited. Assuming no further difficulties, workers should begin clearing the debris and salvaging what remains once the inquest team is finished. According to preliminary reports, while the unfortunate ... landing ... of Stars' End resulted in the deaths of all personnel aboard, the anticoncussion field was sufficient to protect most of the hardware. Whole levels remain virtually intact.

Contrary to what you may have heard, there is no evidence to suggest terrorist activity may have played any part in the accident that destroyed the prison tower.

Stars' End is a viable concept and future developments will prove this. I hope your colleagues will agree with this assessment. If I may be so crass, the Admiralty has never abandoned a project once it has suffered a setback. I don't think we should either. I remain, as ever,

Your Correspondent,
Ilm

To: Assistant-Viceprex Brolylx, Security Division, Corporate Sector Authority, Etti IV
From: Hokkor Long, Secretary In Charge of Scheduling, Imperial Entertainers' Guild, Imperial City
Subject: Recent Allegations

Madame Viceprex,

It grieves me to again repeat that our legal representatives insist your office limit its communications with our office. Until a court date may be assigned, I can only suggest that we maintain minimal contact.

We mean no disrespect, but my office has already informed the appropriate individuals, both in your office and in the late Mr. Hirken's office, of our intentions, so you'll forgive my brevity. Let me again state that we of the Imperial Entertainers' Guild are not in the habit of destroying correctional facilities. We are not in the habit of destroying anything, for that matter.

When we informed the late Viceprex Hirken that the requested troupe had cancelled, we never guaranteed when the replacements would arrive. That a group of impersonators caused some damage to your facility has nothing at all to do with us.

Our office intends to take action against them at such time as they are caught. We intend to prosecute the breach of trademark and guild violations to the utmost of our ability.

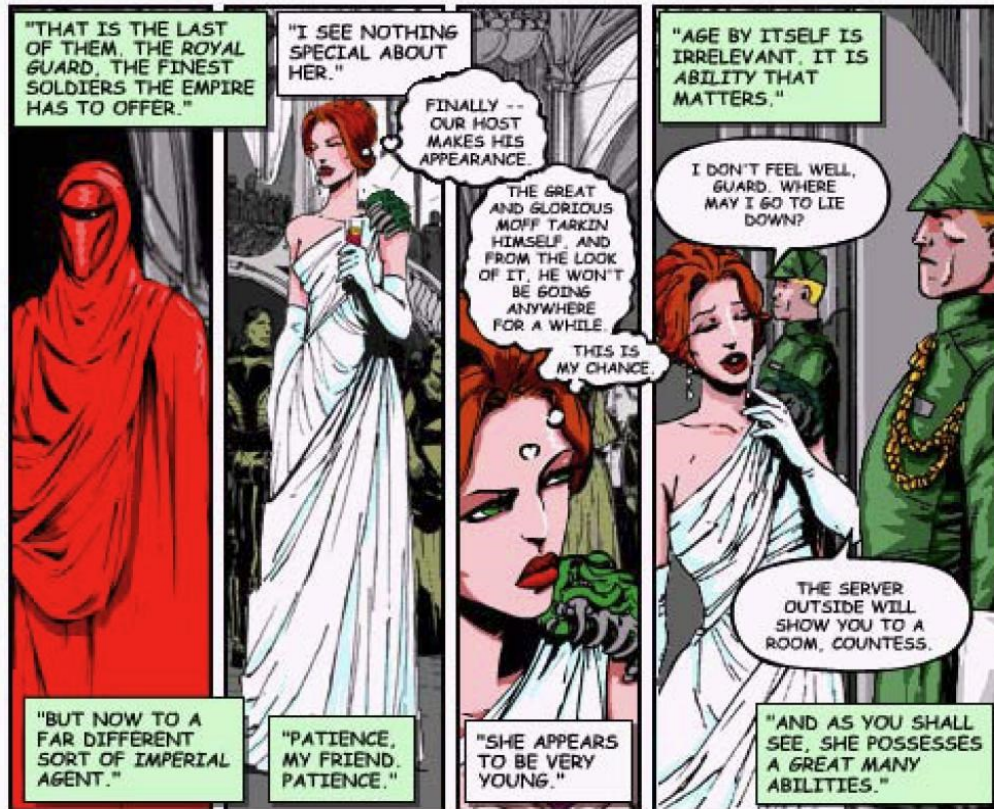
That, however, is not a concession to the claims of your lawsuit. None of the individuals identified in your transmissions have ever held positions with or maintained careers within our organization. I submit their background in entertainment is minimal at best.

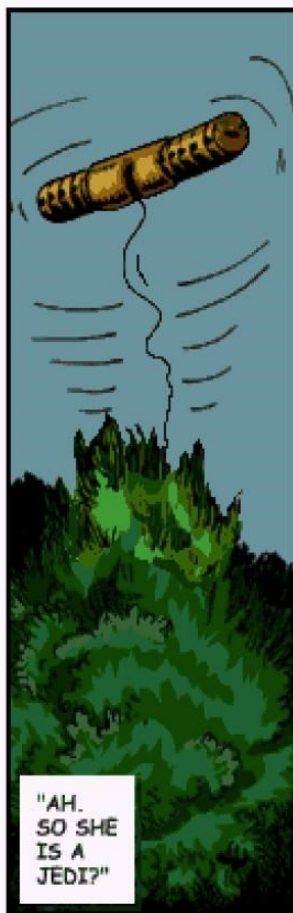
I must repeat my request that your office personnel cease their attempts to bully our staff when they perform at Authority functions. Frankly, this situation has become tiring in its outrageousness. We flatly reject any complicity, responsibility and/or blame in what is unquestionably a failure of your security measures.

To suggest that we are somehow monetarily obligated for the unprofessional behavior of impostors is ridiculous. May I remind you, our countersuit for refusal of payment is still pending.

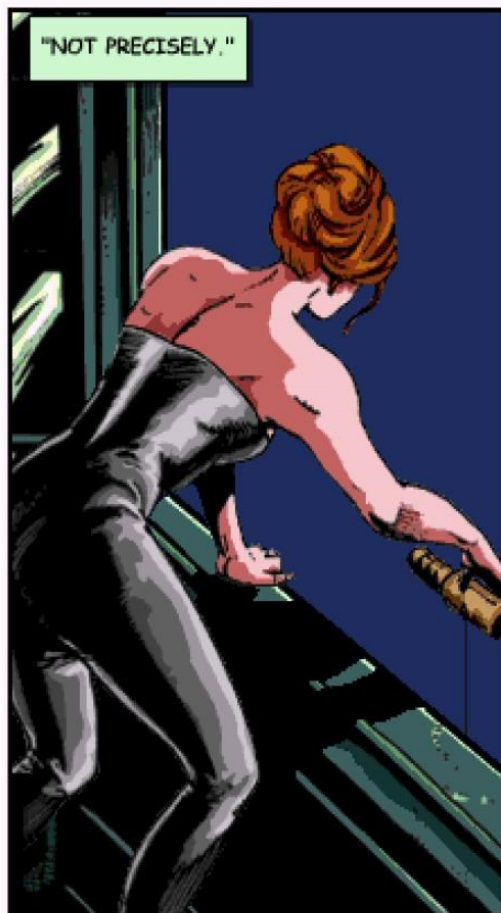
Sincerely,
Hokkor Long

Mara Jade: By The Emperor's Hand #0

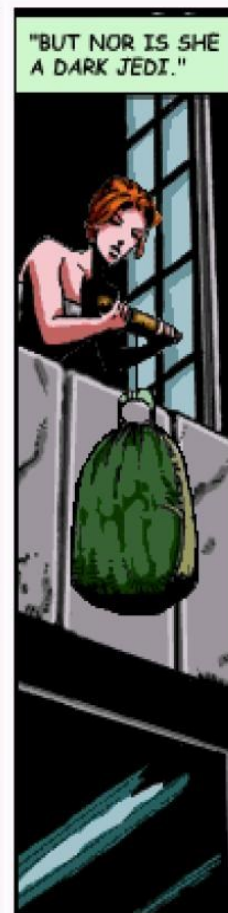




"AH.
SO SHE
IS A
JEDI?"



"NOT PRECISELY."



"BUT NOR IS SHE
A DARK JEDI."



"SHE IS, SHALL WE
SAY, AN EXPERIMENT."



"EXPERIMENTS CAN
BE COSTLY. AND
OFTEN DANGEROUS."



"PERHAPS. WE
SHALL SEE, SHALL
WE NOT?"



"THAT'S THE
LAST OF THE
ALARMS."

"BETTER GET
INSIDE BEFORE
SOME WANDERING
GUARD STOPS
ME."



TELL ME CHILD, WHY DID YOU NOT KILL HIM WHEN YOU SENSED HE WAS NOT ONE OF THE PRACTICE DROIDS?

IT WAS UNNECESSARY.

BESIDES, IT SEEMED TO ME THAT A MAN LOYAL ENOUGH TO GIVE HIS LIFE FOR A TRAINING EXERCISE WAS TOO VALUABLE TO THE EMPIRE TO BE WASTED.

YOU ARE RIGHT, MY MASTER -- NEITHER LIGHT NOR YET DARK. AN INTERESTING EXPERIMENT, INDEED.

AND NOW I HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU, IS THIS JUST AN EXERCISE, OR DO YOU ACTUALLY SUSPECT MOFF TARKIN OF TREASON?

I SUSPECT HIM OF AMBITION, CHILD. THE ONE CAN EASILY GROW INTO THE OTHER.

BUT YOU WILL NOT NEED TO DEAL WITH TARKIN. ANOTHER WILL WATCH OVER HIM.

CHILD, MEET LORD DARTH VADER. LORD VADER MEET MARA JADE.

THE EMPEROR'S HAND.

Rebel Bass

Standing at one end of a ten-vehicle speeder barn, Ryley Ancum folded both arms around the neck of his bass vye. He listened closely as a slow, dusk-tempo ballad replayed through Hannis D'lund's expertly tweaked touchboard. Ry, Hannis, and their friend Erik Lauderslag had formed the band, Far Cry, three seasons ago.

They weren't just "good for two sixteen-year-olds and a seventeen." If Ry knew anything about dusk music - and this year he'd made dusk music his life - then they were good. Unqualified.

Now if they could just get this offworld gig, without alerting any Imperials to Ry's contacts in the Alliance underground.

Dark eyes, deeper than starlight
Warm thoughts caress my soul...

Ry squeezed his eyes shut, pressing the vye against his chest, and tracked the bass line he had just recorded - not only for its musicality, but for the first two notes of each measure.

He no longer double-checked in terms of, How long is the first note? Does it move up or down in pitch, and how long is the second note by comparison? With practice, those thoughts had become second nature, like reading letters off a page. Now, when he closed out the music - which wasn't easy, because Erik had written a gettingly good song - he heard letters and breaks transmitted in bass code. His mind gradually formed words hidden in the playback of "Dark Eyes, Warm Thoughts"

Ten kilotons [strategic metal] shipping Corellia next month. Rumor new warship project. Feeling as if he were emerging from a trance, Ry opened his eyes. His friend Hannis sat on a stool near the touch board...a misnomer, since it wasn't necessary to touch the instrument at all. Thick-set and muscular, with blond hair that dangled over his eyes, Hannis was the group's eldest member.

"Good bass line," he said as the song ended. "Gettingly ragged."

Ry shrugged.

"Thanks," he said, but inwardly he was delighted. Hannis was an expert at all things electronic, but Ry hadn't told him or Erik about the intelligence he hoped to pass to a local cell of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. If Hannis and Erik thought of the bass line as musical - as gettingly ragged - then his camouflage was perfect.

A gust of wind rattled the barn's main door. Ry flinched, then stroked the neck of his bass to cover it. He really didn't think there was any danger that Imperial enforcers would storm in and arrest them, not even if they sat and listened to a performance. His former bass teacher, Tet Tramys, had invented the bass code. It was only used in the Six Local Systems, and only by one small intelligence cell.

That didn't keep him completely calm. He didn't mind a little adrenaline, but he did know that enemies of the Empire sometimes disappeared.

Erik, Ry's tallest classmate, lounged on a small repulsor "throne" in the midst of his perc's and crashers. He hadn't finished muscling out yet, but he could twirl a stick with the best of them, and every song he turned out got better than the one before.

"Ragged," he agreed, echoing Hannis's praise. "And I like the synth, Hannis."

Erik stretched out one long hand and slid a stick along the rim of a suspended crasher. The brass disk rang sweet and low.

"Think Keth Beamis will buy it?" he asked.

"Oh yeah." Ry unstrapped his vye and set it against one wall of the speeder barn. His guardian had ordered several aides to clear the barn so Far Cry could practice inside, but it still smelled like exhaust. This was the first time Ry had actually found anything important enough to relay through the scheduled Alliance scout. He was eager to prove his worth, both as snoop and as relay. Tet Tramys had recruited Ry shortly after last circuit's talent competition, and Ry felt that watching for "real" information was giving him a better education than he was picking up at tech-ed school.

This also gave him a chance to swing back at the bureaucracy that had lured his parents offworld.

"I'm actually amazed," said Hannis, switching the touchboard over into rest mode by waving his left hand. A force field sprang up over its surface, repelling dust motes that might damage its delicate circuitry.

"We've hardly had two paying gigs all season. How did this Imperial talent scout hear about us?"

Ry shrugged.

"I applied."

And he's had me on his scout list ever since he left Tuttin Iv. It's about time I found something to send!

"They need acts for the SLS officers' club circuit," he added. The Six Local Systems had one Imperial Governor, who happened to be Ry's legal guardian. Ry's parents, low-ranking Imperial servants, had wanted him to finish tech-ed school here.

That still jagged him.

The Governor's wing of the Admin Center had all the amenities, including this speeder barn, but Ry still felt as if Tendis and Jioie Ancum had abandoned him. When career advancement called, they left Tuttin IV. His mother had told Ry he'd understand someday.

But that line of thought only led into an asteroid belt of frustration and pain. He braked it.

"From the top," he said. "We want this perfect."

Hannis grinned, and in that moment - for the first time-Ry realized he could be putting his friends in danger without their knowledge. He needed to tell them about the messages they were secretly passing. They'd understand. They didn't like the Empire any more than he did.

Not yet, he told himself. Maybe after the audition.

Two days later, performing for real, Ry slid his hand down the bass's narrow neck, finishing the song with a deep slide. He held the bottom note long enough to punch it a few times with his right elbow, over the FX spot, then jerked his head. Erik, watching for that cue, slammed the tenor perc with a final riff. Hannis's hands froze in mid-dance over the touchboard. Tuttin Tech-Ed fed a large student body in the mess hall where Keth Beamis had decided to hold auditions.

With its multicolored dining furniture pushed to one end, this hall mimicked the acoustics of a midsized auditorium.

Keth Beamis laid his data pad on a table.

"Good," he said.

Beamis wore a drooping mustache and sported a blond ponytail, worn low at the nape of his neck. Ry didn't know much about him, beyond the fact that he gathered intelligence for the Rebel Alliance...and that he had a good ear for all styles of contemporary music: Core drive, minga, flaunt - and dusk, Far Cry's specialty.

"How long you been playing together?"

"Three seasons." Ry spoke up, awed to finally meet this man that Tet had mentioned with such respect. He added, "Tet Tramys help us put together our first cover arrangements."

It couldn't hurt to remind Keth Beamis of their mutual contact.

"Like your sound." Beamis's long nose and high forehead made him look like a Core World aristocrat. "Good balance, and surprisingly mature for your age. D'iund, I hope you stick around for a while after you graduate. Don't go off and leave these two. I think you might qualify to do some full-time performing in the very near future."

Hannis bobbed his head, letting hair flop into his eyes. He cracked his knuckles over his touchboard, a gesture that meant he was thoroughly pleased.

Erik clutched his perc sticks in one hand and held them against his pale green shirt.

"Do we get the job, then?"

Beamis smiled wryly.

"It's too early to tell, since I've still got other systems to visit. But I think you've at least earned a final audition at the home base on Beltrix. That's assuming all your families will let you travel."

"Yes!" Erik slammed a crasher.

Hannis grinned. Beltrix wasn't far, but Erik had never been off Tuttin IV.

"Best clear the, uh, stage."

Beamis made a part-the-waters gesture with both hands, glancing at the tables and seats stacked along the near wall. Behind the piled furniture, Ry could see bits of the mural some previous class had painted, portraying Emperor Palpatine striding from planet to planet, approaching cratered gray planets and leaving a wake of beautifully developed, fertile, wealthy worlds as his New Order spread. Too bad things hadn't actually turned out that way.

"There's another band waiting to set up," Beamis added.

"Whoa." Erik glanced at the wall chrono and grabbed the tenor perc array. "I'm late for smashball practice. Help me pack these up, guys."

Ry dropped his bass in a soft case and started unclipping Erik's crashers. "I'll tell them tomorrow, he decided.

After they finished loading everything onto Hannis's landspeeder, Ry meandered back into the school mess room. Beamis still sat at his table near the embarrassing mural, fingering his mustache as an older band played. Ry got a closer look at the musicians and half-smiled. This was a b'ssa nuuvu group, with the traditional fizz, kloo, bandfill, and ommni instrumentation. The muscular kloo horn player rocked from side to side, swinging his horn in front of him. Ry wondered if b'ssa nuuvu players, too, slipped out of reality into a space-time state where only their music existed.

And now Ry recognized him. Onjo Fegel had dined at Governor Shran Etison's table, which made sense, since Governor Etison was a b'ssa nuuvu fan. Etison seemed determined to give Rya proper social education... and maybe convert him to his own musical tastes.

Life had been different before his parents left. He'd thought he got along well with them, better than nearly any of his friends and their elders.

The chairs behind Beamis were vacant. Ry slid into one and slumped down, bracing both feet against the seat of another chair.

After Beamis shooed Onjo's group offstage, two black-uniformed Tuttin System Security Force officers pushed into the mess room.

"Keth Beamis?" called the leader.

Ry slid back to sit straighter. What would TSSF want with a bunch of musicians?...Unless they'd found out about Beamis's Alliance connections.

Beamis stood up, stretched casually, and flexed his fingers, giving his head a toss that sent the ponytail over one shoulder.

"Hello, officers. What can I help you with?"

"You can come with us," answered the TSSF man who'd spoken.

The black uniform made his skin look pasty-pale with a pink undertone. He beckoned again.

"So can you, kid. We have some questions."

Ry's heart started pounding a core-drive beat.

Keth Beamis arched his eyebrows.

"I'd be happy to talk with you here," he offered, his voice so calm that Ry suddenly doubted he was an Alliance spy at all.

"Well, we'll see how far we get."

The pinky-pale TSSF officer rested one foot on a vacant turquoise chair while his backup stepped toward the hall's main double door. Ry wondered if they expected Beamis to bolt. Ry's pulse kept driving. He hoped he didn't do anything stupid, like taking a run for it himself.

"You came to the Tuttin system from Thabit." Pinky eyed a datapad.

"That's correct."

"You made inquiries there about a woman named Maiferri Tag?"

Again the eyebrows arched.

"I wasn't able to find her," said Beamis. "She scheduled an audition several months in advance, but she didn't show. I hope nothing happened to her."

The backup officer strolled closer, keeping one hand too casually near his blaster.

"What happened," he said, "was that she got herself arrested on an espionage charge. Beamis, we'd better talk, and not here."

His lip curled.

"Privately."

There'd been a time, pre-Empire, when Ry thought TSSF officers were tough, strong, and virtuous. Recently, the TSSF had attracted people who just wanted to bully other folks.

Beamis smiled pleasantly.

"One good thing about having nothing to hide is that you have nothing to fear. Go on home, Ry. I'll talk with these gentlemen."

"The boy comes too," said Pinky.

"Uh, sure."

Ry shrugged, trying to mimic Beamis's appearance of utter unconcern. He dangled both hands at his sides as he followed the lead officer to a waiting patrol speeder, a recent blue-and-white model that seemed to have sprouted multiple cooling fins all over the engine compartment. Ry slid into a rear seat with Pinky on his right and Beamis sitting beyond him. If the TSSF really was worried, they would've put binders on him. Wouldn't they?

Maybe not. Maybe they'd blast first and ask questions later.

It was a short ride back to the white marble Admin Center. Nestled at the foot of gray cliffs that had attracted mining concerns in a previous century, the Center's west wing held Governor Etison's mansion. Pinky's backup steered them to the east wing and official offices, where they rode a lift down several levels.

Ry marched obediently down a gray corridor that terminated in a broad waiting area. Along one wall was a line of energy-fenced detention cells.

"Thabit Security won't get here for a couple more hours," said Pinky. "Meanwhile, we just don't want you taking unauthorized vacations." He gestured toward one detention cell.

Beamis took a step forward.

"Sir, you can't detain law-abiding citizens of the Empire without adequate cause. I'll give you a pledge of good conduct"

"I think this time the cause is adequate. Inside, Beamis. You too, kid. Three cells down. For all I know, you're an accessory."

"Accessory?" Ry echoed, panic finally getting him by the throat. "I'm.

.. he's... listen, call Governor Etison. He'll vouch for us both. I was just auditioning for a performing job. He's a music scout - "

"And I'm the Emperor's aged grandmother." Pinky's backup grasped Ry's shoulder and gave him a push. Ry stumbled into the nearest cell. He turned around quickly. By then, the energy barrier was buzzing and sparking. The officers led Beamis to a cell farther down the line.

"There's been a mistake," Beamis insisted, stepping into the cell. "Ry, don't worry. We'll talk to the people from Thabit, and then you'll get home for a late dinner."

An administrative aide, sitting at a data terminal several meters away, glanced up as the officers left, then turned back to his terminal.

Ry blinked, too stunned to do much else. What had just happened, and why was Keth Beamis acting so cool about it? Ry looked back up the line of cells. Keth Beamis was sitting down, facing the opposite direction. It looked like a warning not to try to communicate. Ry faced the other direction and stared at the aide, who worked silently. The underground hush made Ry feel as if he were smothering under a heavy blanket, wearing earplugs and a blindfold. He hummed a few bars of "Dark Eyes, Warm Thoughts" and wondered where his parents were. Tendis Ancum's promotion had put him in charge of a factory. Ry's mother had always pitched in as an assistant, but she was also a classical musician, a sweet-voiced soprano who could move the stoniest audience to tears.

Ry clenched a fist, determined not to cry now. He still couldn't believe his parents hadn't taken him with them. Their messages always included apologies for not corresponding often, but that was small comfort. Other than Hannis and Erik, he felt alone in his own city.

He stopped humming. Dusk was the wrong kind of music when you were already smothering in your own hurt and fear.

He hadn't sat long when the administrative aide stood up and strolled in his direction. The man punched a code sequence into the touch panel outside Ry's door, and abruptly the sparking and snapping stopped.

"Etison says he'll vouch for you," he said. "Get home. You're wanted for dinner. Just don't leave town."

"Not a problem."

Ry gestured up the line of cells.

"How about him?" he asked softly. His voice broke on the last word.
"Can't he join me?"

"No," said the aide.

Ry clenched both hands to keep them from trembling. This was no adrenaline rush. This was fear for a friend, and he didn't like it.

Ry's dinner sat like a rock at the pit of his stomach. He'd called Erik and Hannis as soon as he finished eating, and now they perched on his bed. After agonizing over how much to tell them, he decided to spill everything. His friends wouldn't tell on him, and they would be careful.

"I could get a ferret into Governor Etison's database," he finished. "I'm sure I could get Beamis's cell unlocked long enough to get in and get him out."

Erik's head was still shaking. Ever since Ry swore him to secrecy and explained the bass codes, he'd stared down at the bedcover.

"I don't know," he said.

"This sounds awfully dangerous. My folks could get canned from the school if I got in this kind of trouble. And what about Teki?"

Erik's little sister was only four local years old.

"This is just too big, Ry."

Hannis snorted.

"Too big? For us? I think it's gettingly good."

Hannis's grandparents had been Core World aristocrats under the Republic. His parents had fled to the Inner Rim as the Empire tightened its grip, and he'd always considered life something of a game. His expertise with electronics - especially music and communications - gave him plenty of toys.

"No." Erik rarely talked about his past. Now his eyebrows arched as he pleaded, "Guys, you could get killed. Think what that would do to your parents."

To his parents? Ry snorted.

"My parents don't give a Rat's whisker - "

The comlink buzzed on his wall.

"What?" he demanded.

"Ryley."

The voice belonged to Governor Etison's aide, Captain Hall.

"You're wanted in Governor E's office."

"I'll be right there, ma'am," he told the comlink. Then he lowered his voice. "You see? Something's mixing. Go on back home, and I'll do what I can. By myself"

"Call me," Hannis insisted.

"I'm there for you, too," Erik added. "But be careful."

Three minutes later, Ry stood at his sponsor's desk. Shran Etison wore Imperial khaki with an uncomfortable air - no surprise, since he'd been born on a backwater mining world. He had a reputation as a competent administrator, and now and then Ry saw hints that Governor Etison had faint doubts about Emperor Palpatine and his New Order.

No doubt or hesitation showed tonight. The Governor sat in front of his black-suited aide, resting both hands on his desktop. His broad shoulders, wide jaw, and faintly scarred temple hinted at his early career as a smashball hero. His fingers twitched rhythmically.

"I hope the audition went well?"

Ry sat down in his extra chair. He longed to ask what happened to Keth Beamis.

"Pretty well. The talent scout thought we might have a chance at landing a real touring job."

Governor Etison's hands stopped twitching. He glanced up at Captain Hall, a stout woman with gray braids wrapped around the back of her head.

"Ry, I'm afraid Keth Beamis may have just complicated that possibility."

Ry raised one eyebrow with what he hoped was an air of mild curiosity.

"What happened? It sure seemed odd that he was arrested."

Governor Etison looked up at the aide. Ry thought his sponsor's face looked grayer, his worry lines deeper than usual.

"Tell him, Captain Hall." Hall brandished her datapad.

"The Thabit people had a number of questions for him. Evidently he'd tried to contact a woman who recently was revealed as a Rebel spy. He tried to talk about your band, instead."

"Us?" Ry's lip twitched. Was he back in trouble?

"Under certain persuasions, Rebel agents start talking and keep talking. Standard procedure," she added.

A chill raced down Ry's spine. If they'd used truth drugs on Beamis, he was cooked. Not even Governor Shran Etison could save him if Beamis had implicated him...but come to think of it, wouldn't he already be under arrest if that happened?

"We think," Hall continued, "that he wanted to talk about your band to keep his mind on safe subjects."

"What do you mean?"

Calm. Be calm.

Governor Etison leaned forward. When he clasped his hands on the desktop, he flexed his shoulders.

"It's looking as if your friend Keth Beamis was involved in a Rebel spy ring, Ry."

Ry gaped, exaggerating the expression. That reaction would make him look like a kid, but he'd better appear as innocent as possible.

"So when he tried to talk about your band instead of Maiferri Tag," continued the aide, "they let him run on for a while. It's best to let the.

.. subject warm up and get used to talking. He was just insisting you were ready for the circuit, and that he would've loved to offer you a contract."

That was no way to finish an explanation.

"And then?"

Governor Etison sighed.

"He pulled a standard Rebel trick. He suicided before he could reveal any real information. We found an affide crystal under his tongue. Very fast poison. Security tells me those can be hidden under a waterproof barrier inside a drilled tooth. He must've been working it out with his tongue while he rattled on about your band. I'm sorry, Ry. He was using you."

Beamis was dead? Ry shut his mouth. Obviously, Beamis suicided rather than betray Ry and his friends, or any other onsite agents. Rather than tell the Imperials that Ry couldn't be sent offworld because a Rebel cell needed him here, gathering information-especially on the "new warship" Ry had just told him about - he'd taken the Final Jump.

For a moment, Ry hated himself for getting involved. Then his need to blame someone slid around and rested on his parents. They'd followed the Empire blindly, and they'd abandoned him. If they'd still been here, this wouldn't have happened.

Hall leaned heavily on the Governor's desk, hyperextending both elbows.

"So we have a chance for you to serve the Empire, Ry."

Governor Etison waved a hand in the air.

"Yes, and still indulge your number-one passion. I have fond memories of my own performing days," he added softly.

Twenty planetary cycles ago, Etison had a little b'ssa nuuvu band of his own. It was one reason he'd indulged Ry and his friends.

Ry made an effort to lean back in his chair and cross one ankle over the other knee. Serve the Empire? Not after it broke up his family, however willingly his parents had gone. But he wanted to keep performing. Wanted it worse than anything else in his life.

"Look, Ry." Etison picked up a writing stylus and twirled it down the fingers of his left hand. "With this development back on Thabit, there's suspicion that Beamis's talent agency on Beltrix is a Rebel intelligence center. But it's only a suspicion. We want you and your friends to set a trap. I'll send ahead word that you could be bringing in illegal information, and we'll see who meets you... and what they do about it. Don't worry," he added quickly. "I'll include orders that you aren't to be harmed, under the strictest penalties."

"Thanks." Ry hated it when his voice shook this way. "No one would suspect you boys of working for me. Do you see that?"

"Sure."

"Good. And if you'll help, I'll arrange for Far Cry to take the next year completely off from tech-ed school. You can perform that circuit, with or without the talent agency's contract. Even if they get put out of business, I still have contacts in the officers' clubs. This is your big break."

Ry swallowed nothing, connecting a dry mouth with a parched throat.

"You are so right," he managed. "Thank you!"

One day later, Far Cry boarded a transport for Beltrix. Standing inside an echoing hangar, Hannis glared as Onjo Fegel hoisted his kloo horn case onto the boarding conveyor. Until this morning, Ry hadn't known that Onjo Fegel graduated from the Imperial Service Academy...in Intelligence. For the duration of this trip, Far Cry had been burdened with the services of a musically gifted - but completely out of place - kloo horn player.

They were a dusk band, not b'ssa nuuvu! If Governor Etison was still trying to win Ry to his own musical taste, he'd just lost several parsecs of whatever ground he'd gained. They had rehearsed once before riding out to the spaceport. They sounded sick.

When Ry thought about Keth Beamis, he felt even sicker. And what about his old friend Tet Tramys?

He had to warn them to dump all suspicious files and send away anyone who might be recognized. But all day, Onjo had stuck to him like a mynock on a power cable, keeping him from talking to Hannis or Erik about sending a coded message ahead. And they would have only one day on board to figure out how to make Far-Cry-with-a-Kloo-Horn sound less like a herd of giddies in heat.

He strapped down on a frayed, padded seat in the transport's passenger compartment.

There were no viewports. Only a series of clangs, then a garbled voice over the cabin speakers, confirmed takeoff was imminent. Shortly, the transport started shaking. It rattled for several minutes, followed by a series of lurches that made Ry glad he'd skipped lunch.

A flashing light signaled the end of strap-down. Onjo got up, stretched left and right, then straightened his flight suit. Ry had never noticed how subtly comical his slightly rounded cheeks and small nose made his face look. His stubby hands stuck out at the ends of too-short sleeves.

"We must have a Chadra-fan pilot," he said dryly.

"You kids hungry?"

Ry wasn't, not at all, but he followed Onjo downship to a mess cabin. Like the passenger compartment, it had no viewports, no external screens -

nothing to give him a glimpse of the light years they were crossing. One more dirty trick from the universe.

Long tables were filling rapidly, and the transport's crew was handing out a one-menu-suits-all tray lunch. Onjo steered them from the pickup line to a spot near one bulkhead. He touched the heat control on his lunch tray, then raised the lid with a dramatic gesture.

"Wonderful," he exclaimed. "Mystery meat number twelve."

Hannis smiled wanly. Ry didn't find Onjo particularly funny either. He picked at the meal.

After eating silently for ten or twelve minutes, Onjo sliced off a bite of meat and waved it at Erik.

"What you need," he pronounced, "is a brighter riff on those crashers. You're putting people to sleep back there."

"It's dusk, not b'ssa nuuvu." Erik, normally one of the most patient people Ry knew, rolled his eyes. "Look, Onjo, we understand this isn't a real gig, not any more. But don't try to make Far Cry sound like something it isn't."

"For this market, b'ssa nuuvu is a better groove any day." Onjo waved the bite one final time and then chomped down on it.

"Officers. Old people, or getting old fast. Even older than me." He grinned as if he'd made another joke.

Hannis muttered something into his plate.

"What was that?" Onjo asked around his mouthful.

Hannis raised his chin.

"Keth Beamis didn't give this audition to your b'ssa nuuvu band." Onjo leaned over the table.

"There's a lot more to auditioning than standing still with your eyes shut. You aren't ready for the real thing."

"We are prepared," Ry insisted.

Onjo raised an eyebrow.

"Prepared? This from the boy who assumes that the Holstrum Talent Agency on Beltrix has an amp to loan him for his bass? Think again, why don't you? They can't let every outsystem beginner borrow their equipment."

Amp? But -

In that moment, a solution flashed across Ry's mind. He silenced Erik's impending retort with one fast shin-kick. The tall perc player blinked, raised his eyebrows, then leaned back again.

Ry's thoughts whirled. His bass vye was a recent invention, self-amplified...kind of a return to acoustics, but with the conveniences of artistic distortion. Onjo had confused this instrument with the bass mando, a b'ssa nuuvu axe that was barely audible above a solid set of percs unless you amp-linked it.

"Kessel! You're right," he exclaimed.

He was getting a lot of practice pretending ignorance these days.

"Do you think I made a mistake, counting on them? I didn't really think they wanted me bringing a bass amp on board. We used up our weight allowance on Hannis and Erik's gear."

It sounded marginally logical, and apparently Onjo bought it. Ry submitted to ten minutes of stories about musicians who showed up unprepared for gigs, and the dire consequences. Finally, Onjo went for a cleanup droid.

Ry caught Erik's attention with a drum-roll offingers on the tabletop.

"Distract him for a few minutes," he whispered.

As Onjo returned, Erik scrambled to his feet.

"You know," he said, "I've always wondered what sets the b'ssa nuuvu beat apart from minga. You wouldn't have any recordings along?"

Onjo squared his shoulders, stretched his neck, and managed to look down his nose at Erik, who was half a head taller.

"Of course I do," he said.

"You serious?"

"You've gotta always be learning. Or you're dead on the peres."

Onjo half smiled.

"That's the best sense I've heard out of any of you boys. Erik, you've got potential."

He laid an arm on Erik's shoulder.

"We'll see you two in a few," he told Ry and Hannis.

To Erik's credit, he didn't cringe away from the arm or even wrinkle his nose at Onjo's fresh attempt at humor.

Ry sat still until Erik and Onjo disappeared out the mess hall's main hatch. Then he bent toward Hannis, speaking softly. He wouldn't have put it past Onjo or Etison to plant other ears among the passengers.

"I've thought of a way to warn our people there's a spy on board. But I need to know the ship's comm frequency. Do you have any idea what they send on?"

"Sure." Hannis shrugged, smiling. "Spotted it pre-boarding."

"I figured." Ry whacked his friend's shoulder. "Then let's get to the baggage compartment. Fast."

Ry flashed Governor Etison's permission slip at the primitive security droid who guarded the baggage compartment, and they were admitted. He and Hannis swept inside, puffing.

"He's got me pegged for a bass mando," Ry explained as he dug into his vye case. "Give me that frequency. And how fast could you switch a comlink's cover plate with one for a power point?"

"No time at...oh!" Hannis nodded vigorously. "You're going to plug into the comlink and make that pompous shroob think you're using a power source to amplify! I should've thought of that."

"You would've. This time I thought of it first."

Ry hesitated only a moment before going to work on his beloved instrument. As Hannis popped cover plates off the bulkhead, Ry pulled a multitool out of his pocket and carefully slit into the instrument's black plastene wave box, near the spot where its neck joined the body. Nestled inside was a small, metal-wound internal amplifier. He studied it carefully. He was a player, not a circuit-slicer...

"There." Hannis sprang away from the bulkhead. "Looks like you're using a simple amp circuit. Perfect for fooling a simple kloo horn player. Having trouble there?"

"I want to recalibrate this to transmit on your frequency, but - "

"Easy." Hannis grabbed the instrument and the multitool. "It'll take me two seconds...done."

He handed it back just as the hatch slid open. Erik and Onjo joined them.

"All right," Ry declared, casually snapping his bass back together and holding it to his chest. "We've got less than an hour to try to make this group sound like a band again."

Ry helped Erik assemble his peres and crashers around the repulsor-mounted "throne." Hannis dug his touchboard out of a pile of luggage. Onjo assembled the kloo horn.

Then Ry counted off a slow groove for their audition number.

There wasn't time to work out a genuinely musical bass line in code. Ry's new line was full of sour notes, but he couldn't help that now. Letter by letter, he coded in a new message, sending it out over the comlink as he played: Beamis dead. Spy aboard. Raid planned. Destroy records.

When they'd finished, Hannis thrust both hands through his longish hair.

"That was awful."

"Sorry," answered Ry. "Not used to hearing a kloo horn in there."

He tossed a shrug at Onjo.

"Try again."

This time, knowing in advance what he needed to say, he did a little better job of picking initial notes that would settle into a sustain that fit the song's chord structure. There was still one note so sour that even Onjo grimaced. Ry answered with a pained expression of his own, but as they finished the number, having sent off the warning twice, he started to feel better.

Now if only someone had been listening. And hopefully, no one in the cockpit cared if music came off the ship's transmitter. Judging by the condition of its interior, the crew didn't care much about much at all. This was a low-priority supply run.

"Onjo," Hannis sighed, "couldn't you at least try to make your line fit our style? Come on. I bet you could play dusk in your sleep."

Onjo's round little eyes narrowed.

"As a matter of fact, I could."

This time through, Ry played his original bass line, the one with the message about the metal going offworld. Why not? If anyone on Beltrix was listening, they might as well get the whole story.

"Huh," said Onjo as he laid down his horn. "I have to admit, that was a better blend."

Hannis cracked his knuckles over the touch board.

"I thought so, too."

He glanced sidelong at Ry, and Ry gave them all a thumbs-up salute.

A horn blared from the comlink panel, and for a mercy, Onjo didn't seem to notice that the comlink had a power-point cover.

"Time to strap down," he announced. They secured their instruments, then hustled back into the seating area. Ry harnessed in, then settled back to wonder what really waited on Beltrix III... whether the "talent agency" was destroying records, or if a squad of Imperials was headed for the loading dock.

The transport lurched and shook. Overheads rattled. Ry clutched the arms of his seat and wished he were somewhere else.

"Hannis," he muttered, "you'd better switch those panels back on the ride home."

"Right," mumbled Hannis.

After the shaking stopped, the strap-down light kept flashing. The passenger compartment grew quiet, then slowly filled with suspicious murmurs. Ry heard, "...lost baggage?..." and "...wrong terminal?"

Erik craned his neck, then murmured, "Onjo isn't here."

Ry gritted his teeth.

"Then we'd better hope they heard the music."

Onjo Fegel quickstepped down the boarding ramp toward three spaceport enforcers. He didn't care that the kids knew he was only along to keep them from spoiling Etison's trap. But en route, he'd changed his mind. Instead of going through with a painful, humiliating performance, he could hit the so-called talent agency now.

"The kids are strapped down," he announced as they boarded a speeder. "They can't warn anybody, even if they are involved."

"We'll soon know, sir," said the enforcer sharing his seat.

It was a fast cross-town hop to the talent agency. A young man sat at the reception desk, his dark blond hair just longer than Onjo could approve.

"Welcome," he said, sweeping out both hands. "Gentlemen, what can the Holstrum Agency do for you? Combo? Duo? Perhaps a pair of battle droids to liven a convention?"

Onjo flashed his ID and walked around the counter toward the data terminal.

"Step back," he ordered.

"Of course. "

The man swept out his hands and got up.

"Perhaps you'd like to check our talent listings yourself."

Onjo waved one of the local enforcers forward. The man keyed rapidly, inserting a ferret into the system that would sniff out arcane activities. Onjo glanced around the reception room. Blue walls displayed a constantly changing array of billing posters. Acoustic panels floated beneath a sloped ceiling.

And it was all just a front. He could almost taste his next promotion.

.. hopefully to a Core world, where b'ssa nuuvu was appreciated.

The enforcer looked up from the data terminal, compressing his lips in a straight line. He eyed Onjo.

"Sorry, sir. It looks like you made this trip for nothing, unless you wanted to hire a juggler."

"What do you mean?"

"They're clean, sir."

Onjo pushed the enforcer aside.

"I think not."

Five minutes later, he slumped over the terminal. He'd failed. The Rebels had to be elsewhere, but his only potential informer... Beamis... was dead. It was back to square one. Once more from the top. First measure, and what key were they playing in this time?

For this, he'd spent two days with three kids who didn't know b'ssa nuuvu from minga?

A pair of brilliant overhead lights separated Far Cry from the rest of the galaxy. Facing three murky silhouettes seated behind a long table, Ry counted off the intro to "Dark Eyes, Warm Thoughts."

To everyone's relief, Onjo had announced he would skip the actual audition, and he was nowhere in this dark, cramped room. Ry suspected he was somewhere else in the building, checking out b'ssa nuuvu groups, and so Hannis hadn't even bothered to set up a fake amp for Ry's "bass mando."

One uniformed enforcer did sit staring over the talent scouts' shoulders, but Ry could ignore him. If anyone had intended to arrest him and Erik and Hannis, they would've already done it. So for the next five minutes, there would be only music.

And after two interminable rehearsals with Onjo Fegel, this was music. Hannis's touchboard glisses fell slowly to settle each cadence, eking every shred of emotion from each line. Erik drummed a slow, steady beat on the tenor array, riding one crasher for the choruses. Beneath them all, Ry's bass line sang out a solid bottom...the original bass line, naturally.

To Ry, "Dark Eyes" would always be about metals going offworld.

Hannis held the final chord infinitesimally longer than usual, and Ry let the bass ring out before elbowing the FX spot. They'd turned up nothing for Governor Etison; their chance for fame had evaporated, but for this moment, they stood as professionals among professionals. Nothing ever felt so good.

Two of the scouts stood up and walked around the table toward the band.

"Good job," pronounced the man in front.

His gait and build reminded Ry of his old friend, Tet Tramys, but Tet hadn't worn a goatee -

Then he caught the grin behind those new whiskers. It was Tet! Ry clutched the neck of his vye and grinned back. Even with an enforcer watching, he had every right to bask in these compliments. Erik lounged over his tenor set, beaming.

The second scout, a long-haired woman, stood just out of the circle of light, behind Tet. Oddly, she was humming something in a sweet soprano voice. Her riff sounded more like b'ssa nuuvu than anything else.

"Doo-dit, doo, doo..."

Ry straightened, careful not to stare at the woman's silhouette. Was that bass code? Finally, she stepped into the light. Ry got a good look at her face and nearly fainted. She'd changed her hair color and style, and he'd never seen her wearing anything remotely like this beaded shift-smock before -

But that woman was his mother.

Did she honestly work at Holstrum Talent Agency, or was she covering for an Alliance agent who'd just skipped town... or was she an Alliance agent? Maybe she and his father left him on Tuttin IV to keep him out of danger when the Alliance recruited them. Maybe now she could see that he, too, was ready to be trusted on the front lines.

"Di-di-dit, dumm."

Shutting her eyes, she tossed the long hair. Tet turned aside. He said something to Hannis. He might as well have been speaking droid dialect for all the attention Ry paid him.

Good job, good job. Ry finally caught the rhythm of the hummed code. He smiled, though he kept looking at Hannis and Tet. He felt like his brain was swimming in blue milk, blowing funny little bubbles. His mother hadn't acknowledged him, but he could see from the lines around her eyes and crossing her forehead that she was barely keeping herself from taking a run at him, arms flung out, just like she used to do.

Need you home, for now, he heard. Good job, Ry. So proud.

Tet turned away from Hannis and Erik.

"Gettingly good," he announced, "and I'm sorry, but we've got three dusk bands on the circuit already. Try again next year."

Ry groaned, just as the enforcer would expect.

"Thanks anyway," he said. "Thanks for listening."

"Our pleasure."

His mother put so much pride into those two words that Ry's last doubts flitted away for good. He ached to sit down and talk with her...and with Tet...but with that enforcer still sitting behind the table, he couldn't. He cased his bass and helped Erik load peres. As they exited the gaudy reception room, he glanced back over his shoulder.

His mother had followed them out. She barely lifted one hand.

He nodded vigorously, eyeing the animated displays on the advertising wall. Hannis would figure out a way to send code between systems.

He had a lot of catching up to do.

True Talent

"Great save, Gryffus!"

"Swallowed 'em whole, Warbird."

Conn Doruggan luxuriated in the gang stall's hot-water spray as his teammates poured praises on him. The official New Order sport of wegsphere grew in popularity daily, and as it did, his stock soared. Diving across the six-sided, low-grav playing well last hour, he'd blocked Copper League's final scoring attempt. He'd won the game for Maroon again.

They called him "Gryffus," after an Alderaanian bird of prey. He couldn't wait until next week's twentierm game against offworld Raithal ... not the military academy, of course, but its civilian counterpart. For the first time in three years, Alderaan hoped to win.

On Raithal, nearly the entire planet would watch. The cross-space HoloNet hookup cost both Universities thousands in comm fees, but viewing tickets were selling fast — even here, and Alderaan wasn't a big wegsphere world yet. Conn blamed the scornful comments of a young Organa heiress. He'd like to see her handle a wegsphere save. Conn's long, springy legs, enormous hands, and excellent low-gravity reflexes made him a champion.

He dressed in a comfortable post-workout robe. With his friends Pul and Tannan, he hit the moving walkway back across campus toward lihot Residence Hall. Warm spring air fluffed his hair.

Tannan nudged him. "Hot blood alert." Three female students approached on the opposing walkway, wearing little more than was necessary. Conn clutched fistfuls of his maroon robe and flapped it like a pair of wings. The smallest woman grinned as the group slid past.

"Get her comm-number, Gryf." Pul nudged him.

They sauntered into lihot's broad lobby. Conn threw down his duffel for laundering. "Hey," Gannan exclaimed. "Final marks are on the personal board."

Academics, the bane of Conn's existence. He sidled toward Tannan, who was already poking controls to light up final grades for all three of them. Tan had been born with good marks. Conn's appeared last. He'd passed everything — marginally — except —

"Wow," Pul breathed. "What happened?"

"Azzi." Conn growled the Modern History professor's name. "Must not have liked my es-

say." Conn's last-minute treatise on Human Expansionism would've impressed other profs. Azzi openly opposed New Order "tyranny," right down to its public games. "Thanks a squirt, Azzi," Conn muttered. He'd have to repeat that class offseason.

"Bad luck, Gryf." Pul patted his shoulder.

Bad luck? It was the final insult. Conn's talents were wasted here. "Hold the lift," he ordered Pul.

Less than an hour later, dressed in his one-piece formal suit, Conn stood in front of a recruiting desk. Two natty young officers sat on the other side, beneath a tri-dimensional Imperial Service Academy logo. Raithal Mil had a tough, rigorous curriculum ...

And the best wegsphere team in the Core. "That's right," Conn repeated. "As of today, I can get to the Raithal system before next term."

The man sitting on Conn's right had the musculature and complexion of a butter newt. He touched several buttons and frowned. "I am sorry, young Doruggan. Your marks are not Academy caliber. Modern History is particularly objectionable."

Conn folded his long arms and swooped for the kill. "That professor's a troublemaker. Check the Physicum. Under wegsphere."

The skinny left-seater raised a curly black eyebrow. "You're a wegman?"

"One of the best," Conn pronounced. "That's not bragging. It's a fact."

More buttons clicked. The newt stood up. "Ah, Doruggan," he squeaked, "There is a five-season scholarship reserved for an Alderaanian with your talents. It includes special tutoring to ensure satisfactory Academics. I can swear you into His Imperial Highness's service here at this desk. Raise your right hand."

Conn thrust it up. *Just like setting for a serve*, he observed. ☺

Latest Developments: The Emperor's New Clothes versus Deeply Religious

— From the *Galactic Weekly NewsStack*

The Emperor's New Clothes was rather needled by the two tracks on *Deeply Religious*' first compilation — "Torch Song" and "Just Another Art Form," and they responded with a very pointed track of their own, entitled "Artistic Integrity." The gist of this track was, "We're artists just like anyone else, we operate under the same freedom of speech laws as you do, and if you don't like our material that's just tough."

Deeply Religious has responded in kind, with a nasty little track called, "Ooh, It Bites." Meanwhile, the Imperial Board of Culture is making bewildered noises on the sidelines, because since the latter group was banned, the Board no longer investigates their material, and as a result it is only hearing one side of the argument. This one looks likely to run and run ...

— "Ars Dangor" (pseudonym),
Arts Correspondent

Coruscant: Center of the Empire

Part 1: Bright Lights, Very Big City

ARCHIVIST'S NOTE: This four-part series is derived from a new museum exhibit now on display at the Imperial Heritage Museum in Galactic City. This exhibit, titled "Imperial Justice: Triumph of the New Order," examines the case of a saboteur who, the court found, engineered an assassination attempt on the Emperor himself.

A Message from Corporal Vune Willic

Dear Mother and Father,

Though I have never visited our family's ancestral homeworld, the spires of Imperial Center and Galactic City feel somewhat familiar. It reminds me of our home city on Carida - - the architecture, anyway. Imagine the same layering of modern structures over old-style classical buildings you see

around the Academy, only on a planetary scale, and you'll begin to get my meaning. I'm dictating this letter while riding in the back of an air taxi to grandfather's apartment, where I shall pay my respects, and then I'm off to meet with my new commanding officer. But first, a bit about my arrival.

I had hoped the transport might dock in orbit and allow me to ride down to the surface on a skyhook, but lately those have been closed off to the public due to Rebel threats. Instead, we came in over the northern pole, where enormous automated machines provide drinking water to the rest of the planet.

It's true that Coruscant - - that is, Imperial Center - - really does have icecaps. Air traffic was heavy, and I fear our pilot must have been overworked. We nearly flew directly into the path of one of the orbital solar reflector stations, which could have blotted out the sun on the surface and cooked us all in the shuttle!

We then passed over the area the locals call the Works, an old industrial sector reborn. According to the shuttle captain, the plants turn out hundreds of TIE fighters and other assorted craft every day. A large portion of the military and Corps of Engineers is also stationed here. I had thought that was where I was being delivered, since architecture and engineering are my specialties.

To my surprise, our transport flew on to the heart of Galactic City itself! The shuttle set down in the Senate district, a towering collection of clustered spires and glorious towers occupied by the administrative offices and the residences of those said to have the Emperor's ear. Banners and holo-displays have already been set up for the next Galactic Games, which will begin in just a few days (I guess that explains the heavy air traffic). A subordinate of my new commanding officer met me on the platform, a striking fellow who bears a passing resemblance to the famous Grand Moff Tarkin. He told me to meet my grandfather and get settled, then report to his office in two hours for a briefing on my first mission. I am still uncertain what that mission will entail, but my mysterious contact confirmed that all of my skills would be required.

We're getting close to grandfather's home near the Entertainment district, and what a difference a few levels down can make! Even at mid-morning, synthetic lighting and hologrammatic adverts have replaced natural sunlight. Every form of entertainment seems to be available, from drinking to

gambling to gladiator fights. I intend to spend some time here as soon as duty allows. Perhaps my skills will be needed to inspect the architectural safety of these lower levels, which must be a marvel of engineering. I'm told they descend for kilometers downward.

I've arrived at the landing pad outside grandfather's complex. I'll be sure to pass on your best wishes.

Your son,

Corporal V. Willic

Imperial Center

Part 2: Heart of Ice

ARCHIVIST'S NOTE: Here we see a private entry in the triple-encrypted personal holographic journal of saboteur Vune Willic from the day he met the officer who would ultimately uncover his treachery: Ysanne Isard. Transcribed from "Imperial Justice: Triumph of the New Order" with permission of the Imperial Heritage Museum.

Vune Willic's Personal Journal

It seems the Corps of Engineers may not be my ultimate destination. Against a friend's better judgment, I have decided to record recent events for posterity - - the life of an ISB agent is glorious, but all too often brief. I have been on Imperial Center for less than a week. Yesterday, I received my orders from the head of Internal Security herself: Security Director Isard.

Her office occupies a small but well-situated corner suite in the Senate district, with a surprisingly broad view of the skyline and the city canyons below. As severe and cold as her reputation is, I immediately sensed that one accepts her orders and acts on them ultimately out of respect, if not outright fear. She is not a woman to be lightly betrayed or disappointed; those who do either find themselves regretting it for the rest of their short lives. After only a few hours on the job, I'd already heard the stories that she may have turned in her own father, the former director, to attain her position.

Once I had accepted the job with not a little pride, I received my first

assignment, a brutal task that I then had no choice but to carry out. To my surprise, it had nothing to do with my primary areas of expertise - - architecture and engineering - - and everything to do with the fact I had led the Academy sharpshooting team. The Director informed me that a Rebel agent operating under long-term deep cover had been discovered in the heart of Galactic City itself: specifically, the very quarter of the upper levels where my grandfather lived. The ISB Director wanted the agent terminated, not captured, and grandfather's apartment window offered a perfect shot at the unit the Rebel occupied. I was given a jet black disruptor rifle with a handful of cartridges. The targeting scope was keyed to an ident tag the ISB had attached to the spy. I also received an encrypted comlink directly to Isard so she would know when the deed was done.

I fulfilled my first mission that very night. I was mounting the rifle in a casing made to resemble an astronomical telescope when I heard grandfather return from the Outlander, a nightclub where he claimed to spend all his time and money. The rifle in my hand began to whine faintly, which I recognized as the targeting lock on the scope. Yet I saw no targeting indicator when I aimed out the window. With dread, I opened the sliding door onto the balcony and swung the "telescope" around toward the entryway and gazed through the "eyepiece."

A small red indicator blinked where my grandfather stood. Only one charged shot from the sniper rifle was required, and the high-powered disruptor vaporized the Rebel spy Korval Willic on the spot. He did not even appear to be surprised.

As promised, ISB agents removed me from the premises. I spent the last night in debriefing and received a commendation, along with my next assignment, from Director Isard.

I'm in it deep now.

Part 3: Dangerous Pawns

The trial of Vune Willic brought a great deal of formerly classified documents into the legal domain, and now the Imperial Heritage Museum offers a truly special account - - a report on the attempted assassination of the Emperor by Rebels at the Galactic Games, dictated by Security Director Isard herself, prepared for Vune Willic's court-martial hearing. But first, for

historical perspective, the exhibit presents a contemporary HoloNet news account.

Rebels Strike Galactic Games, Emperor Unhurt

Relieved Citizens Applaud Capture of Assassin

GALACTIC CITY, Imperial Center - - Rebel spies have staged a daring assassination attempt against Emperor Palpatine at the opening ceremonies of this year's Galactic Games. Fortunately for all citizens, the plot was stopped through quick action of the Emperor's Guard and, according to some eyewitnesses, the Emperor himself.

The day began with a glorious red sunrise and an inspiring parade of athletes from all participating worlds of the Empire. The skies over the Senate district were clear for the first time in years as the planetary government diverted all automated traffic patterns around the area. The Emperor was slated to open the festivities with a speech to his subjects at the end of the parade, but the speech would be late.

According to official spokespersons, a Rebel saboteur named Vune Willic infiltrated the Imperial military and successfully planted scan-shielded thermal detonators in the Emperor's speaking platform. These sources say "quick-thinking" Guardsmen noticed some unnecessary equipment mounted on the platform, and the gathered crowds gasped as a pair of red-robed guards leapt from the dais and climbed down the sides of the structure, reaching several of the explosives in time.

Then the area was rocked by a single blast, one last bomb that the Guardsmen could not reach. Screams and gasps of alarm rang in the morning air, but the crowds were soon expressing relief - - though a few retainers lay unmoving on the battered platform, the Emperor stood, unharmed, and strode boldly to the dais's edge, scanning the crowd. As footage from the scene shows (see GCN HoloFile 7784D2), the sharp-eyed Emperor spotted Willic fleeing the scene and ordered him apprehended. Some eyewitnesses, who wished not to be named, claimed that the saboteur actually froze on the spot and collapsed when the Emperor stood to examine the assembly. Though no doubt the craven Rebel had simply lost his nerve and begun to cower in fear, the display still left citizens more in awe of our benevolent leader than ever.

The Emperor began his address to the visiting Games participants only two hours behind schedule, and his inspiring words will no doubt propel the athletes to new levels of glory. Already, several medals have gone to the Coruscanti athletes, who thanked the Emperor and his encouragement for their success.

Authorities have told Galactic City News that Willic faces a public trial next week.

Classified Brief on the Galactic Games Incident

Filed by Ysanne Isard, Director, Internal Security

I hereby declare this a complete and true account of the Galactic Games incident and the part played by Lieutenant Vune Willic.

Vune Willic was recommended to me by a trusted operative. Though I would soon learn the error of my ways, I found him to be an intelligent, capable young officer loyal to the Empire and extremely talented in the fields of engineering and demolitions. He was assigned to lead the engineering team in charge of building the Emperor's dais for the Galactic Games address. The previous team leader died suspiciously, and I suspected the team may have been infiltrated by Rebel scum. Lieutenant Willic was to ensure the Emperor's safety and root out the spies, if any.

Unfortunately, I was not able to penetrate the web of deceit that Willic had laid until it was almost too late. The day of the assassination attempt, a pair of YI-5 droids found DNA evidence implicating the Rebel in the death of the previous team leader, Lieutenant Brot Gorrell. But Willic was not able to play us for fools after all.

Thanks to coordination between Internal Security and the Imperial Guard, Vune Willic has been apprehended and interrogated, and he is scheduled for execution in two days. I ask the court that the traitor's death by firing squad be broadcast on wideband HoloNet to viewers across the Empire. Although the Emperor - - to my surprise - - forgives the confused young man's transgression and has asked the court to sentence Willic to life imprisonment, the people of the Empire believe he must pay the ultimate price.

Part 4: Eyes of Red and Blue

In the end, Vune Willic's time on Imperial Center was short. The last major piece of the Imperial Heritage Museum's "Imperial Justice: Triumph of the New Order" exhibit had to be heavily edited for public consumption before it became a coherent narrative.

The confession itself was obtained by a YI-5 Surveillance/Interrogation droid. Vital statistics on that droid, now a workhorse of the ISB, follow. Note that some sections, including the true record of the Games incident, the betrayal of a new recruit, and the conspirators involved in the plot, were not included in the actual museum exhibit until the New Republic era.

*YI-5 Performance Report and Interrogation Transcript**

SUBJECT: Vune Willic

INTERROGATION SUPERVISOR: Security Director Ysanne Isard

YI-5 PURSUIT RECORD: Day of incident, this unit tracked subject Vune Willic through the underlevels of Galactic City. Subject visited Coco Town district and the Outlander nightclub on way to Galactic Games assignment in the Senate district. Subject observed committing the following crimes: Loitering, pit gambling, speaking via unlicensed encrypted comlink. Preprogrammed data records subject in act of setting explosives.

YI-5 INTERROGATION RECORD: TRUTH SERUM ADMINISTERED.
INTERROGATION SUPPORT SUBROUTINES INITIATED. HOLOCAM INITIATED.

SUBJECT CONFESSION: I, Vune Willic, confess to the crimes of which I'm accused. I cannot deny the record. I further avow that I did not act alone in this endeavor, and have handed over the names of my co-conspirators to Director Isard. I pray the Empire against which I have committed these crimes will grant me the quick death I deserve.

*Translated from binary.

Performance Review: YI-5 Surveillance/Interrogation Droid Classified

Review Commentary by Internal Security Director Ysanne Isard

The new YI-5 espionage droid has continued to exceed expectations, and I heartily endorse the construction of several thousand more to supplement ISB operations on Imperial Center and beyond. Their small size, unobtrusive appearance, and stealth capabilities will provide much-needed reliable information.

The droid's dual-purpose function has proven most useful - - once the droid surreptitiously gathers evidence against a Rebel, saboteur, or other criminal, its interrogation subroutines and specialized equipment help the interrogator pry needed information from the accused. The YI-5 helps establish confessions when needed, and to provide important clues in the case of an overarching conspiracy. I have also requested that the droid design team research additional micro-weaponry for mission-specific goals. The tiny droids make excellent trackers and interrogators; perhaps they could serve equally well as hunter-killer units.

In the case of Vune Willic, the YI-5 unit performed well beyond its programming. The droid's holocamera did an excellent job synthesizing and modifying certain holographic images featuring Willic himself that guaranteed the subject would eventually accept his own guilt and accept his fate [See transcript]. The "impartial" evidence gathered by the droid allows us to use Willic as a public scapegoat for the assassination attempt, while executing the actual conspirators in secret. Naturally, the public could not be allowed to learn that several of the Emperor's most valued officers had turned traitor. Instead, we have given the citizens a lone Rebel madman that can and will be punished for all to see. Of course, the Emperor was never in actual danger; our ruler himself saw to that. After all, I was acting on his direct orders.

Addendum: Though I suspected at first that three foolish design techs had been having a joke at my expense, I have been assured by the droid design division that the droid's red-and-blue "eyes" are simply specialized optical sensors tuned to all heat (red) and light (blue) signatures. I hereby remove the outstanding termination order on Corporals Gonrey, Vypass, and Streln.

Yavin: The Big Red One

In the days before the New Republic, common galactic wisdom held that all Rodian males feel the call of the hunt, while all Rodian females feel the call of performing for money, child-rearing, and food preparation.

Common galactic wisdom about Rodians has largely been written by Rodian males. It is largely incorrect.

Take Suz Tanwa, perhaps the most well-known Rodian female in the New Republic (outside of popular holo entertainment). Never joined to a mate, the eldest (and thus far only) scion of her clan plied her trade as an independent treasure hunter on the Outer Rim for almost two decades before making her fortune. Now one of the wealthiest and most renowned figures on Rodia, the current Chair of Xenoarchaeology at Coruscant's most prestigious university has finally released her memoirs to a public eager for details of her legendary exploits.

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 2.5 standard hours

And to think I almost pawned the old amulet for a few hundred lousy credits. You can't blame me, though. The thing is hideous. It's also very, very old. Been in my family for over two hundred generations, or so the story goes. And over those two hundred generations - - something like four thousand years - - the amulet's secret had been lost or forgotten by the clan.

See, the amulet my grandfather gave me, the one that supposedly belonged to a very distant ancestor of mine who helped save the clan from extinction so long ago, the one hanging from the tarnished chain around my neck - - well, it's no amulet. It's a cleverly concealed ancient data crystal. And if I've interpreted the ancient Rodese correctly, it shows the location of five priceless treasures, any one of which might be enough to buy me my own moon, if not my own planet.

The only problem? Location, location, location.

The treasure is all located in one system. That part's convenient. The inconvenience is that this system was just recently the site of a Rebel terrorist attack. Personally, the Empire isn't my favorite group of space-hopping fascists, but then again they didn't survive this particular fight. The Rebels destroyed some kind of space station in the system near the fourth moon of the gas giant, and they're running an equally large salvage operation out near that moon right now.

No worries for me. Not yet anyway. According to the data crystal and my approach vector, the place to look first is the atmosphere of Yavin itself.

Yavin is one of those gas giants that looks like it missed out on stardom by a very slim margin. You wouldn't believe how bright it is. Yet according to my scans, there's no fusion going on down there. Just a very cold metallic hydrogen core under unbelievable pressure. Photons enter the red-orange atmosphere and get trapped, giving the planet incandescence even on its dark side. It's not really self-generated light, but it's close enough. The Yavin-light is one likely reason so many of the gas giant's moons (three!) can support life. It ensures a semiconstant day/night cycle on those worlds as they orbit. A Corellian transport approaches a gem-fishing station above Yavin.

That's assuming life here developed naturally. What I've learned from this ancient piece of crystal around my neck makes me wonder.

TU-5 just informed me that the stone-fishing vessel is returning our signal. Looks like they'll be willing to let me buy a ride, though it's not going to be cheap. But "cheap" is relative, considering the value of what I'm after.

In case this is the last entry I make - - there's any number of ways this particular archaeological expedition could get me killed - - I'm attaching the registration beacon ID and scan records of their vessel along with this datafile and storing both in TU's dedicated memory. He also contains my will and the translated contents of my little family heirloom

Addendum

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 2 days, 7.2 standard hours

I've got it. It really exists. And if this one exists, they all might. This find alone is enough to let me retire in comfort to a small estate on Rodia. Four more, and I should be able to buy the western hemisphere, at least. They'll have to respect my professional credentials now, too. They'll name a museum after me if I have to build it myself. But when they all see this, I won't have to.

The storage pod is definitely ancient. As old as my data crystal, according to TU-5, which only makes sense. And inside, five of the biggest Corusca gems I've ever seen. There haven't been stones this big harvested in this system for thousands of years.

If only Captain Jymbud and his crew were still alive to get their cut. Blast it, there was just no time to warn them. If I hadn't cut my skiff free in time, the floater pack would have torn me apart, too. Looks like the old Tanwa luck is holding out; TU was keeping my comlink channel open.

Next stop, the thirteenth moon.

Captain Suz Tanwa's Hunt Log

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 3 days, 7 standard hours

You would have thought that flying a stone-fishing skiff, on my own, for the first time, while maneuvering it into position to retrieve a 4,000-year-old storage pod at 20 atmospheres and escaping before a giant mindless balloon ate me would have been the hard part of this expedition to the Yavin system. But I'm beginning to think my troubles are only beginning. See, the second hidden cargo pod described in my amulet data crystal didn't stay so hidden over the years.

It was bound to happen. My ancestor did the best he could, but he's been dead for four millennia. Then again, you'd think he would have mentioned that the thirteenth moon of Yavin is inhabited by more than cacti. In fact, it's not even much of a desert planet. Most of the southern hemisphere is open, shallow sea, which spreads what little moisture there is into the atmosphere.

I set out this morning with my scanner showing the pod a half-click north of my landing position. I'd have gotten closer, but the Reeko's landing sensors wouldn't let me - - the pod was sitting in the middle of some kind of cave formation that made the moon's surface look like Byss cheese. No point in risking the ship. Besides, for a desert planet, it looked like a fairly cool day. The gas giant was blocking Yavin's sun, so temperatures were about what you'd expect on an early morning on Rodia, just without the humidity. Without any humidity. I left TU on the Reeko just in case and brought my extra hold-out blaster along with the usual supplies.

My scanner showed that the pod was some 20 meters beneath the surface, but my own eyes showed what looked like a fairly flat, rolling plain up ahead. The only real evidence of a tunnel network underneath the surface - - one that was looking less and less natural to me - - was the absence of cacti. Couldn't see any entrances, though.

Some treasure hunters might have started looking for a tunnel, but I didn't know how long I had before someone, probably the Imperials, noticed my moon-hopping and decided to see what I was up to. Time wasn't on my side. I marched straight out into the grassy plain until the scanner showed I was standing directly above the pod's homing beacon, in a sandy patch where nothing was growing. (In retrospect, that probably should have told me something. I need to write a textbook for treasure hunters someday, warn them about this sort of thing. Make a note). I whipped out my vibroshovel, jammed it into the dirt. I certainly didn't expect the dirt to hit me back.

Four snakes, each one almost 5 meters long, surfaced in the loose sand, throwing me off balance and onto my rear. They almost immediately had me surrounded, hovering over me like, well, giant snakes. They hissed and snapped at each other, and occasionally eyed me. No, they weren't just hissing, they were talking. Intelligent snakes. Well, why not? I held tight onto the deactivated 'shovel, but decided to just remain still and see what they did.

Intelligent or not, they flicked me a few times in the face with forked tongues, hiss-talked a little more, then seemed to come to some kind of agreement. One of them coiled itself around my torso in the blink of an eye, pinning my arms to my sides and making me drop my vibroshovel. I stifled a yelp, since it wasn't squeezing hard enough to suffocate me I didn't want to give it reason to do so.

The giant snake carried me within its coils in a sort of sideways slither, then dropped me in front of a 1-meter hole I'd missed set deep in the side of a small hill. I sat up slowly, and the snakes all backed away. One made a weird, not-hissing noise - - a cluck, I guess - - then they all dropped onto their bellies and side-slithered away. They were gone before I could get to my feet.

I retrieved my 'shovel and peered into the hole, but dropped it again in alarm when a furry visage that looked like a mammalian version of a proper Rodian face - - except with giant pink ears like dishes - - appeared inches away. I jumped back, and the large black pair of eyes was joined by two more. I scooted back on my hands and feet as the two Rodian-sized rodents shuffled cautiously from their cave, chittering excitedly. One of them seemed to win a short argument, raised a simple spear in the air, and squeaked in my direction. Then it slowly lowered the spear to the ground and stepped back, nodding at me, then at my vibroshovel. (Who knew rodents could nod?)

I locked eyes with the bolder of the two, picked up my 'shovel, and placed it on the ground opposite the spear. Hope he didn't think it was a gift. I only had the one.

As soon as I took my hands off the shovel, both of them started hopping back and forth on their feet, really excited this time. One of them squeaked something back down the tunnel, and within another few seconds, the first two parted to make way for a third big rodent. This one had graying fur and moved more slowly. Unlike the others, he wore a simple homespun tunic.

Between two large, broad paws, he held the pod.

The old rodent shuffled over to me, around the implements on the ground,

and placed the pod on the soil before me. He touched a blue button on the side of the half-meter-by-half-meter cylinder, and atop the pod a sparkling blue hologram sputtered to life. The figure speaking made no sound - - apparently the audio circuits had corroded - - but the face of my Rodian ancestor was unmistakable.

"Rodian," the old rodent said slowly, then nodded at me again. It slapped its chest and then said something that sounded like "Gerb." I nodded, touched my own chest and replied, "Rodian." Then I pointed a sucker-tip at him and said "Gerb."

That seemed to be enough. He nodded one more time, and then all three rodents turned and hopped on broad feet back into their tunnel. I was alone with the reassuring face of the founder of the Tanwa clan for another few minutes, watching as the long-corroded batteries powering the hologram faded, then finally gave out.

I signaled TU-5 to bring the ship over and lower the ramp. I'm no first contact specialist.

Addendum

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 3 days, 9 standard hours

No Corusca gems, but something that should fetch a nice price from the appropriate buyer: some kind of small crystalline pyramid that's made from the same material as my ancient amulet. That makes me think this pyramid may be for data recording, perhaps even a legendary "holocron."

Unfortunately, those legends hold that you need to be some kind of Jedi to make one work, and they're all dead. I sure can't make it do anything. Still, to the right buyer, definitely a priceless artifact.

On to Yavin 8. Definitely no sentient species there to get in my way. Just need to make sure I bundle up.

Ugh. Rodents. Why did it have to be rodents?

Captain Suz Tanwa's Hunt Log

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 4 days, 20 standard hours

This may be my last entry. I know I've said that before, but one of these days I'm going to be right.

I'm sitting in a dark, damp, cave somewhere under the mountains of Yavin 8, and something is hunting me. A lot of somethings, I think. Fortunately, this old pod was built to last. There's no way I could have treaded water for the last 10 hours, but the pod floats.

It began simply enough. Once again I brought the Reeko in to a safe landing point, this time even closer to the homing signal from the pod. It appeared that when my Rodian ancestor jettisoned this one, it landed high in the equatorial mountains. What little information I had on the tundra-covered eighth moon said that its share of dangerous creatures tended to stick to the tundra and avoid the mountains entirely. So a short walk seemed safe enough. And it was, all the way out to the pod, which had embedded itself in the side of the mountain. When I got there on foot, I saw that a particularly sturdy scrub tree had grown around it sometime in the last four thousand years, so I hacked the pod clear with my vibroblade. That turned out to be a bad idea.

Cutting into the tree exposed the pod, which seemed as unharmed and intact as the first two. But when I shoved my trusty vibroshovel into four millennia's worth of muck and gravelly mud to leverage the pod free, the spade punched clean through the side of the mountain, like a knife through thin leather. The sudden lack of resistance made me lose my balance. I flailed, grabbing onto the old pod as I plummeted headlong into black, empty, underground space.

My fall didn't take me far. I hit water within fifteen, maybe twenty seconds, and managed to hold onto the pod. I even managed to hold onto my shovel and supply pack (including my recorder, obviously).

And that's how I ended up here. I don't dare move in the direction of whatever those creatures are, because they don't sound friendly, but for some reason, they won't come out to me either. I know they can see me, or at least sense me somehow. They react with more gibbering whenever I splash or MAKE A PARTICULARLY LOUD NOISE - - there, see? That got them riled up - - but they won't come after me. I already called TU-5, but I have no idea if he'll be able to get the Reeko close enough to rescue me, or even get a clear transmission from my homing signal. So here I am, speaking my last words into this blasted recording unit, which is probably a waste of battery power - -wait.

They've stopped jabbering. And something just moved past my leg under the water.

This might be it.

Addendum

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 5 days, 4.7 standard hours

Something is seriously peculiar about this system. This makes two moons and one gas giant visited by this lucky member of the Tanwa clan, and I've got three intelligent species that no one will ever believe I discovered. The attached datafile has specific observations and information on this latest species, the Melodies. The data is all I could glean from gestures and a few simple words we managed to teach each other. In exchange for a datapad containing a children's Basic tutorial and taking the strange metal pod away from their cave, they not only spared my life, but the young ones escorted me all the way back to the Reeko. The only catch is, I had to promise them that I'd keep this data safe and secret. I'll be happy to, at least until such time as they decide to join the rest of the galaxy (or the Empire finds them).

I almost forgot - - my ancestor's storage pod was indeed intact as I suspected, and contained what at the time must have been a powerful blaster weapon. By modern standards, it is a fairly primitive pistol with a

slow refire rate that requires power packs that haven't existed for four thousand years. But while it may not be as powerful as the one I wear on my hip, it's in flawless condition and should net me plenty of credits from the right collector

Captain Suz Tanwa's Hunt Log

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 5 days, 17.5 standard hours

Much as I'd love to get a look at the huge, pyramidlike structures my scanners picked up on the far side of this moon - - the data crystal indicated they were packed with treasures and loot, or at least they were 4,000 years ago - - there are just too many Imperials that would probably want a closer look at the Reeko's registry. That salvage operation looked nonmilitary and was definitely winding down, but even nonmilitary Imperial jobs nearing an end seem to come equipped with four TIE squadrons and a pair of Dreadnaughts these days. They're all staying in rough geosynchronous orbit right over those ziggurats, which actually helps me, since I'm headed to the other side.

The wreckage of that space station the Rebels blew up must be pretty valuable to the Emperor if his lackeys are still picking through it. Funny, I heard it was an educational facility full of schoolchildren, but you can't believe what you read in the sludgenews. Maybe after they clear out, I'll investigate.

Oh, who am I kidding? I'm going to retire if I pull this job off.

As long as I head to the far side and shut down main power, Yavin's natural electromagnetic interference should hide the rest of the ship's systems, including TU-5. The fourth pod should be under the dense rainforest on the opposite side of the moon. My next entry will be recorded on the sur -

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Addendum 1

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 5 days, 17.6 standard hours

Wonderful. Fantastic. This just... couldn't be better.

I'm hanging upside-down from my safety harness in the cockpit of the Reeko, and I sure hope the recorder keeps running, because I'm looking at a large cluster of what I think the crystal described as "grena - - "

Addendum 2

Target: "Family Jewels"

System: Yavin

In-system: 6 days, 1.8 standard hours

Testing. Recording one, two, testing.

All right. That wasn't as bad as it - - ouch - - could have been. The recorder's back in one piece, as am I. The Reeko has been righted and covered in camo netting, and TU-5 is carrying out repairs to the hull and cockpit. We should be back in Yavin orbit and on to our last stop before the Imperials figure out what happened. And most of a treasure is better than no treasure at all.

I should have expected that the Imperials would mine Yavin 4. I mean, if I had lost a giant educational facility to Rebel terrorists over a particular moon, I might expect those terrorists to be using it as a hideout. Couldn't have them coming back now, could they? When we landed (and I last had my recorder running), I found myself looking through the cockpit window at a cluster of ripe blue grenade fungi, a curious local species that spreads its spores via explosive combustion. Turns out a dozen would have been enough to reduce me to a pulp. As it was, the blast merely shattered the cockpit window and knocked out my recorder. While I put TU to work fixing the Reeko, I grabbed my field gear and crawled out into the jungle.

The scanner had to be wrong. The screen showed the pod's beacon was moving away from me. Why would a sealed cargo pod sit in one place for four millennia and then run off at the first sign of trouble?

A few seconds later, the direction changed again. Now it was coming back toward me. That was good, since I'd made it all of 10 meters in the thick undergrowth so far. Then it turned to the right, then the left, and as I stared incredulously at the scanner, it started to circle me.

Finally, I stopped staring into the scanner and looked up at the dark jungle. The shadows were broken only by a few shafts of Yavin-light, a glint off the silver-green hull of the Reeko, and roughly a dozen pairs of blinking, glowing eyes.

They were called "woolamanders," according to my datapad. Fairly intelligent for little arboreals, though not truly sentient as far as anyone could tell (or bother to find out). As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could make out at least a half dozen of them holding pieces of my ancient cargo pod, including a large section that contained the homing beacon, which still blinked red in the darkness. The little woolamanders couldn't have taken the sturdy pod apart. Then I noticed the gleaming silver edges of the pod's fracture points sparkle in the eerie reddish light. No corrosion on the edges. That could only mean - -

I shattered the pod, with the Reeko, when we crash landed. Chihdo always said my aim was dead-on. Guess he was right.

But what about the pod's contents? The pod was a fascinating artifact in and of itself, but I had three already. The real treasure contained therein had to be around somewhere. I couldn't see that the woolamanders had anything like what my ancestor described on the datacrystal. Then, as if guided by that "Force" you used to hear so much about back in the day, my eyes lit upon my prize: the armor of an ancient Sith Lord who had once enslaved my ancestor. It hung suspended from a tree branch overhead, and the woolamanders seemed to be giving it a wide berth.

It's nice armor. Amazing armor, really. But I do find it hard to believe it really belonged to the man that the crystal said it belonged to. I mean, Exar Kun? Was he even a real person? I'm beginning to think that the ancestor

I recently "met" on Yavin 13 may not have always been honest, even with his own progeny. I've attached the pertinent data to this file for posterity. You never know which journal entry might be your last.

1 bby

Grand Moff Tarkin's Data Journal

Personal Data Journal Entry #529, Tarkin recording

...

More reports of a growing rebellion come from a wide variety of sectors. I study these reports with some trepidation, for I see a pattern developing that hints of more than a few coincidental and unorganized uprisings happening simultaneously.

I fear that the rumors of a central rebel government may be more than just spacer talk. Perhaps the unconfirmed reports of rebel support in the Senate are even true. There is no hiding that Senators such as Mon Mothma, Harkon Dell and Leia Organa have voiced their displeasure with the Emperor's New Order. Still, I am not worried by these rumors of rebellion. In fact, I would welcome a rebellion!

The Death Star will make the Empire invincible, and the destruction of rebels and malcontents is exactly what it has been commissioned for. I look forward to demonstrating its power for all the galaxy to see.

The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut — The Celestials

Edited transcript of debriefing of Insmot Bowen, Pre-Republic specialist at the Obroan Institute, as conducted by Bevel Lemelisk, Master of Imperial Projects; Admiral Conan Antonio Motti; and General Arhul Kurumenga, Department of Military Research, dated 1 BBY.

Dr. Bowen: I don't know quite how to begin, gentlemen. How familiar are you with pre-Republic history, and the beings popularly known as the Celestials.

Admiral Motti: We've heard our bedtime stories.

General Kurumenga: Admiral, if you would. Don't you worry about that, Dr. Bowen. You give us the sitrep, and we'll figure out what it means. I'd rather you tell me things I already know than inadvertently leave out something I don't.

Bowen: Very well, General. We know very little about the first civilizations of our galaxy. More than 100,000 years ago, species such as the Columi, the Gree, the Kwa and the Sharu were exploring interstellar space. Sadly, what records exist from those civilizations are either fragmentary, have decayed into legend, or both.

Motti: Not to mention they were written by nonhumans, and thus untrustworthy.

Bowen: Of course, Admiral. Anyway, all of these early spacefarers were contacted by the species known to us as the Celestials, or sometimes the Architects. We have neither reliable records nor even legends about how the Celestial dominion came to be, but it is clear that they were beings of astonishing power. The Columi appear to have retreated from the stars after contact with the Celestials, while the Sharu sought refuge in primitivism. Extrapolating from the technologies they employed, it's believed the Gree and the Kwa became Celestial servant species, as did the Killik hives. Using these species and doubtless others as labor, the Celestials built a number of astonishing technological projects for their own purposes.

Kurumenga: Which were what, Doctor?

Bowen: I can't speak to their motives, General — they're frankly unimaginable. But they built star systems. Possibly even star clusters.

Master Lemelisk: Did I hear you correctly, Doctor?

Bowen: They built star systems, yes, Master Lemelisk. Systems such as Corellia.

Motti: Star systems aren't built. They simply are.

Bowen: I beg to differ, Admiral. The chemical composition of the Corellian planets matches no known model of the formation of stars or planetary discs. Mathematical analysis of the system's planetary orbits indicate they have

decayed into near-ellipses from circular orbits — something that's very rare in the galaxy.

Kurumenga: Very rare, you say. But not unique?

Bowen: That's correct, General. We've identified 17 systems with a similar signature so far.

Motti: There are billions of star systems in the galaxy, Doctor. That's a big enough number to account for 17 strange things.

Bowen: Not something this strange, Admiral. The odds against the kind of mixed chemical signature we see in the Corellian system would be measured in the trillions. And the odds against such a model of orbital decay occurring naturally — I wouldn't even know how to calculate them.

Kurumenga: And you say there are 17 of these systems?

Bowen: So far. We haven't had sufficient time on the available AST installations to complete an observational survey of all the candidate systems. But I feel confident in saying the only rational hypothesis is that those 17 systems — and doubtless others — originated as artificial constructs. They were *built*, gentlemen.

Lemelisk: Built with what?

Bowen: We don't know, Master Lemelisk. But Old Republic records chronicle the Vultar Cataclysm, an event in which the activation of an artifact known as the Cosmic Turbine destroyed that system. I suspect this Turbine was of Celestial origin. Unfortunately, gentlemen, travel to the Vultar Nebula is interdicted. The primary accounts of the Vultar Cataclysm would have been part of the Jedi Archives, which are restricted. If our researchers could just —

Motti: That order was issued for public safety and civil progress, Doctor. I would think of man of your credentials would know better than to begin a scientific inquiry with the maunderings of an obscene cult of extinct charlatans.

Bowen: Of course, Admiral. I only meant —

Kurumenga: Doctor, are you saying you believe the Celestials built the Corellian system using this... Galactic Engine?

Bowen: Cosmic Turbine. It's possible, General. Though I wonder if the Turbine might have been part of a network of such devices, most of them now dismantled or destroyed — or perhaps yet to be found, out there in the Unknown Regions. The most promising site for further investigation is Centerpoint Station.

Motti: That tourist attraction? Whatever for? It's an old colony ship — an ark the ancient Corellians never bothered breaking up.

Bowen: That's unlikely, Admiral. For one thing, where are its engines?

Motti: Well —

Bowen: And why are there are no records of a sleeper ship being built that was even a fraction of Centerpoint's size?

Lemelisk: Doctor, let's grant for a moment that Centerpoint Station *is* a Celestial artifact. What do you think its purpose is?

Bowen: I don't know, Master. But I think I understand — in broad outline, mind you — how the Celestials did what they did. I think their Turbines were tractor-repulsors built to move planets and stars through hyperspace.

Lemelisk: Impossible. The amount of energy required for such a device...it boggles the mind, Doctor.

Bowen: I agree wholeheartedly, Master. Yet I can come to no other conclusion.

Lemelisk: Doctor...could such a device have been used as a weapon?

Bowen: Of course. It could as easily destroy the conditions for life as create them. More easily, in fact. Destruction is always orders of magnitude to bring about than creation.

Motti: You're saying the Celestials could have destroyed an entire planet?

Bowen: The ability to destroy a planet would have been insignificant compared with the power at their command, Admiral. The Celestials had technology that allowed them to configure star systems to their liking. As well as doing other things.

Kurumenga: Such as, Doctor?

Bowen: I believe they engineered the hyperspace barrier that surrounds our galaxy, either to protect themselves against invasion or to prevent the return of beings they had exiled from this galaxy. Perhaps both. And I believe they engineered the chain of hyperspace anomalies that have long frustrated exploration west of the Deep Core.

Motti: Amazing. Truly amazing. I'm curious, Doctor — is there a galactic phenomenon you believe to be *natural*? Is there anything out there you think *wasn't* built by these superbeings of yours?

Bowen: Possibly not, Admiral. Not just our galaxy but indeed our entire universe may be a Celestial construct.

Motti: Have a care, Doctor. I will not be the butt of jokes.

Bowen: I assure you no disrespect was intended, Admiral. I meant every word I said.

Kurumenga: Doctor, the origin of the universe is a bit beyond our purview. But indulge me. If the Celestials were as powerful as you say, why would they create a barrier across the Core?

Bowen: I think the western anomalies are a remnant of the construction of the circumferential hyperspace barrier — or the bubble, as I like to call it, since evidence indicates it extends above and below the galactic disk as well. General, when you were a child did you ever have a spinning top? One with a string?

Kurumenga: It's been a while, Doctor, but I'm familiar with the concept.

Bowen: Imagine that our galaxy is a child's top, and what we call the circumferential barrier is a collection of countless whorls and eddies spinning around it too quickly to safely traverse at faster-than-light speeds. I believe the Celestials spun up that barrier by tapping the energies of the galactic center. The western barrier, essentially, is what's left of the string. It once extended across the entire galaxy, dividing it in two, but is now decaying and gradually retreating toward the Core.

Lemelisk: But why build such a thing?

Bowen: I couldn't speculate, Master. But it's clear that the Celestials, for all their power, dwelled in a dangerous galaxy. They were at war.

Lemelisk: At war? With who?

Bowen: The Builders — more properly known as the Rakata.

Motti: Ah, the Rakata! I'm impressed, Doctor. I thought your expertise limited to science fiction, but it also includes holothrillers.

Bowen: Admiral, I'd counsel you to look past all that to the underlying facts. Countless species tell variants of the same story. And by analyzing the commonalities of those stories we have reached conclusions that are accepted by every reputable scholar. Around 30,000 years ago, the Rakatan Infinite Empire spanned much of our galaxy. The basic technologies that underpin our common civilization are all of Rakatan — and perhaps ultimately Celestial — origin.

Motti: Arrant nonsense!

Kurumenga: Conan, if you would. Please continue, Doctor. I've heard of the Rakata — we all have — but please give us your summary of who they were.

Bowen: Well, they're not like the Celestials — we know what they look like, for one. They were bipeds, bigger than humans, with amphibian features. Their empire was ruled from a planet called Lehon, in the Tempered Wastes. And their technology, it's believed, was based on the Force — which had interesting consequences for their rule.

Motti: The Force!

Kurumenga: Go ahead, Doctor.

Bowen: The Rakatan hyperdrive was of no use for traveling between arbitrary points in realspace, General. It didn't work that way. Rather, it honed in on the signature of worlds strong in the Force — ones brimming with life, in other words. Rakatan shields and energy weapons worked the same way — they used crystals to focus the Force and create sheets of defensive energy, or spin that energy into destructive beams of light. The entire Rakatan civilization was

built on such uses of the Force. And so as that civilization expanded, it needed the Force for fuel, fuel it obtained by finding planets rich in life and –

Motti: General, I really must object. We have strayed into discussions that are in poor taste. Not to mention ill-advised. They could be considered treasonous.

Kurumenga: I don't hear a threat to the New Order just yet, Admiral. Dr. Bowen is an academic, and as such we must allow him some leeway in discussing the mistakes and misapprehensions of the past. Please continue, Doctor. The Rakata would use the Force to find planets with life...

Bowen: And then they would enslave those planets.

Lemelisk: Which ones?

Bowen: Hundreds, Master Lemelisk. Including this one. Human history begins with our tenure as particularly useful Rakatan slaves, serving the greater glory of the Infinite Empire.

Kurumenga: And the Celestials?

Bowen: They disappeared. We don't know what happened to them. They may have been trapped inside our galaxy by their barrier and destroyed by the Rakatan revolt. They may have escaped through the barrier. Or perhaps they withdrew into some dimension beyond the reach of the Rakata and ourselves. But it seems we remember them. Or rather echoes of them.

Lemelisk: Echoes? Such as what, Doctor?

Bowen: Let me activate the holoprojector. Such as that.

Motti: What is...*that*?

Lemelisk: I've seen reliefs like that here on Coruscant, in ancient districts. Ophidian grotesques, I believe they're called?

Motti: Grotesque is certainly an accurate description.

Bowen: This one is much older than anything found on Coruscant, Master. It was discovered on a world called Shatuun, in the Kathol Outback. Nothing has lived there for hundreds of thousands of years, but something once did — and

whoever they were, they carved this. Or look at this one, from Caulus Tertius. Also destroyed eons before the dawn of the Republic.

Kurumenga: Are those meant to be serpents or vines?

Bowen: Perhaps they're tentacles. Or some combination of the three. Whatever they are, they're a recurring motif in the art of ancient civilizations we believe had contact with the Celestials — contact that ended with those civilizations' destruction. The other apparent legacy of a Celestial connection is pyramid-building. The Kwa built them. So did the Sharu. And many others.

Motti: Snakes and pyramids. Is that it, Doctor?

Bowen: Snakes, pyramids and the ability to move around the stars like a child rearranges toys, Admiral.

Lemelisk: And you have no theory about what became of the Celestials?

Bowen: All we have are a few guesses — and some secondhand sources that are little better than legends. The grimoires of the Gree Enclave say the work of the Ancient Masters — the Celestials — was undone by two curses unleashed by the Soul Hunters, whom we identify as the Rakata. The Gree name those curses the Gray Swallowing and the Faceless Mouths, and further refer to them as the Hollowers of Beings and the Eaters of Worlds.

Lemelisk: And from that you conclude there was a Rakata revolt? That's not a lot to go on, Doctor.

Bowen: I agree, Master. But the evidence is considerably more clear that the Rakata waged devastating war against the Kwa and the Gree. And the Killiks simply vanished. All three, we believe, were key client species of the Celestials. It looks as if the Rakata were determined to exterminate or drive out their rivals among the Celestial slave species. Once that had been accomplished, they found their own slave species and trained them to use Rakatan technologies. Species such as ours.

Now, Rakatan technology never achieved the heights of the Celestials, but only by that lofty comparison do they fail to measure up. We know that they crossed interstellar space in skipships defended by energy shields, devastated entire planets with disruptor fields and built armies of war droids armed with

lethal plasma cannons. Moreover, reputable historians claim they had giant space stations that could transmute stellar radiation into war materiel. They were the unquestioned masters of the galaxy — and of our species — for millennia.

Kurumenga: So what happened to them, then?

Bowen: Their empire imploded, General. Billions died of a plague that ripped through their worlds. It then mutated — but this mutation didn't kill. Rather, it cut the Rakata off from the Force, rendering their ships and weapons useless. With their numbers already reduced, they were helpless. Their former slaves rose up, killed them and took their technology. What few Rakata remain dwell out there, in the Unknown Regions, hated and hunted by other species.

Kurumenga: You said we took their technology. But hyperdrives and blasters don't require the Force.

Bowen: Correct, General — in fact, the Rakata were careful to keep Force-sensitive slaves away from their machines. But that drove their slaves to take their technology and reverse-engineer it, eliminating the role of focusing crystals and anything else that required the Force. Duros, Herglics, Baragwin, Devaronians, Gossam and of course the Coruscanti all experimented with hyperspace cannons, tumbledrives, pulse cannons and other derivatives of Rakatan technologies. After they were Force-blinded, the Rakatans tried to do the same. But it was too late. They were too reduced in number — and their former slaves exterminated them wherever they found them.

Lemelisk: And built their own empires with their masters' technology.

Bowen: Indeed, Master Lemelisk. The humans of the Tetrahedron, the Herglics, the Tionese and the Hutts all quickly established their own territories. The biggest challenge they faced was how to plot safe courses through hyperspace — because the Rakata, of course, had never had to do that. Once those challenges were solved, those territories began to coalesce into the Republic.

Kurumenga: Fascinating. Thank you, Doctor.

Motti: It's a good story, I'll give you that. But even if one-tenth of it is true, I fail to see its relevance to the challenges faced by the Empire. We have wiped the Jedi contagion from the universe, and we need no planet-moving tractor-repulsors to combat Separatism, lawlessness and rebellion.

Bowen: Granted, Admiral. You spoke earlier of holothrillers, did you not?

Motti: I beg your pardon?

Bowen: The villain dies in a holothriller, but you never get to see the body. Do you assume he's dead?

Motti: I don't see –

Kurumenga: I think I do. Go on, Doctor.

Bowen: When our ancestors were still howling primates, our galaxy was ruled by a species that could create, reconfigure or destroy star systems according to some unimaginable whim. At some point more than 30,000 years ago, the Celestials' dominion vanished. Yet there's no record that they were ever conquered. We don't even know what they looked like. We never saw the body — they simply disappeared. Considering what they could do eons ago, gentlemen, ask yourself this: *What if they return?*

Strangers with Sweets

There wasn't much work for a military historian on barren G'rho. Too far Rimward for even smugglers to bother with, it could barely be called settled — let alone defended — and most of its inhabitants were potters or weavers. Yet Ydra Kilwallen Sibwarra had fled Chandrila six months ago, when a fellow Force adept (studying under her Force trainer) vanished. Vacationing with her parents, Ydra hadn't even commed home to her husband. She and little Dev had boarded the first ship off planet. That'd been the first step. Eventually, she'd sought out her brother Trig.

Trig had helped Ydra badger G'rho's militia boss, a mahogany-skinned Ilwizt alien whose most prominent facial feature could only be called a trunk, into hiring her as his historian. She barely made enough credits to feed herself and Dev, but here she felt safe. Data trickling to her office barely interrupted her real work: a history of Chandrila's subversion by the Empire.

So this morning, it had come as a shock when her screen blanked and a message appeared:

REPRT DEF BASE IMMED. BRCO.

She found panic in Major Brco's office.

"Six of them." Brco leaned away from his viewscreen with his red-brown trunk thrust toward her. Both nostrils flared at its end, vibrating when he spoke. "They ride heavy."

Half a dozen aides and controllers milled around Brco's console, which was normally manned by two or three. Ydra touch-typed on her datapad and stared at the screen. The ships were coming in on a classic invasion maneuver, settling to ground around Boku Settlement. "Who are they?" she asked, stunned.

He swept his trunk toward the main monitor. "Unknown," he buzzed. "No response to our comm hails."

Ydra mated her datapad to Brco's monitor and left it there, then glanced right at another viewscreen. Dust boiled where one craft had settled down. Boku's domes had been built near an ore vein, away from G'rho's scrubby juvica highlands. There'd be little cover for settlers to hide in.

On screen, a column of creatures tramped out of the dust: armed brown reptiles, shorter than humans. They vanished into a 10-family rez dome ... hers.

Dev! Ydra thrust out through the Force. At ten, although small for his age, he was growing easier to sense. If he had a fault, he was too sensitive — too trusting.

And now he wasn't home. Did she dare hope he was outside the encircled domes?

Major Brco thrust his trunk through a mike ring. "Lieutenant Jerriman?" he buzzed.

A voice answered through speakers over Ydra's ear. "Jerriman here."

"They won't talk. Launch fighters. Fire at will."

A nerve-rattling roar swept over the dome. Until today, the G'rho Defense Force's importance had been questioned; not anymore. Now Ydra flailed for her brother Trig's flicker in the Force. Trig and his new wife Seni both piloted Conjo fighters. She found them. Then:

She thought hard at the sweet, shadowy echo of herself; Dev's sense twitched, coming alert. She projected emotions and concepts — *Aliens! Danger! Run away!*

Dev's thought-shape promised to obey. Ydra bit her lip and dissipated the connection. She might've just sent him away permanently. Alone.

But what else could she have done? He'd head for high ground, for the juvica forest. Any place looked safer than the domes, just now —

She heard an explosion as a shock wave pitched her against a controller. Brco's screens winked out. The lights darkened. Suddenly, the air smelled strange —

"Down on the floor!" Brco buzzed. "Don't breathe! Evacuate — crawling!"

Ydra dropped to her knees and held her breath. Just like that ... were they all dead? She could go longer than others without breathing, using the Force. But where was Dev? His glimmer seemed fainter. *Good! Run away!*

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Several hexagonal viewscreens made a honeycomb mosaic on the Ssi-ruuvi lander's fore bulkhead. Unit Commander Th'twiril twitched his tail in satisfaction. P'w'eck ships were down, forces spreading out. Life-form scanners showed a dozen-thousand humans on this world: worth raiding, but too few to resist. Yifail's crew would entech four dozen to refresh the converters. Then captives could be revived four dozen at a time and entech at leisure. Only a dozen-dozen or so had escaped encirclement. Th'twiril personally flew this reconnaissance.

Below his starboard viewport, a small human skittered up a narrow ravine. Dunes above the defile resembled L'whekk's nesting sands, with no weeds in sight.

He whistled to his pilot, "Land near that side channel. Give me full biochem readouts on the creature. It looks immature."

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Dev Sibwarra pounded to full stop on yellow-brown sandstone and caught his breath. He'd heard the Defense Force take off. The sizzling, roaring, and crashing sounds of a battle had echoed down his ravine ... and then stopped. Then the sun blinked. He'd heard a faint whir.

But that'd stopped too.

He ran some more. Mem wanted him far from the dome. She'd felt worried, and she hadn't wanted him to know. He'd caught undertones about aliens, and an invasion. The Empire didn't like aliens.

Dev and his friends did, though. This wasn't fair, sending him away. He'd like to see one — other than stodgy old Major Brco. He reached out to catch Mem's sense.

She wasn't scared any more ... she wasn't even there. He'd never gotten far enough away to stop feeling her through the Force. Even when she was asleep, he felt something.

He ran farther, thinking, *She promised she'd always be there. She promised I'd always feel her.* Here — in this corner of his mind — the emptiness scared him.

Fiveshapes appeared just ahead, on the ravine's lip. They looked like the shimmerlizards that lived under every rock here, but much bigger and darker brown — and these stood up straight. They were also bulkier, with rounder heads.

Dev braked by running into a boulder. He ducked behind it.

Maybe the silence meant the aliens had won. Maybe Mem wasn't coming back. Ever.

He crouched, hiding. Scrambling and swishing noises got closer. They'd seen him. They were coming to get him.

Nothing happened. Wind whistled up the ravine.

After a long time, he calmed down. He peered out. The five aliens stood four meters away. They had short, thick tails that stuck out behind them. Their short, scaly arms clutched peculiar weapons, but they weren't pointed at him. He ducked anyway. They didn't move. He straightened again.

The biggest one opened its mouth. It made a weird sound: not exactly a tweet, more of a twoot. It was trying to talk.

Was it saying, *Surrender, or we'll shoot? Hold still, so we won't miss? Or Hello, human. What's your name?* Dev tried reaching out with the Force, but he'd only ever really connected with Mem. Other humans were hard to read. But if these creatures had meant to kill him, wouldn't they have done it right away?

Maybe they were friendlies. New ones, that the Empire hadn't heard of. G'rho was parsecs from nowhere. Maybe this was a first contact. Maybe the Defense Force had overreacted. Maybe these five were trying to apologize ...

"What do you want?" he asked.

The big one on his left twooted again. It ducked its body so low that it almost scraped the sand with its scaly chin.

Dev stepped out from behind the rock. He

pressed his palms together the way he'd seen Mem greet Major Brco, and he bowed from his waist.

The alien made a trilling noise. It straightened up, pulled something out of a pouch it wore at one side, and held it up to its beak. With short white teeth, it bit off half. Then it held out the other half in three long claws, waving its other arm in a come-here gesture.

Dev gulped. He'd been taught on the school board that aliens' food poisoned humans, but Mem had always said that the Empire taught many lies about aliens. She'd claimed she'd had alien friends before he was born. He wanted to believe her. He wanted to stay calm. He wanted all this to work out.

She'd also told him not to take food from strangers, though. Dev walked closer. He reached for the morsel. As he snatched it, his littlest finger brushed the alien's smooth claw. The alien smelled like spoiled duncow milk.

But the food smelled like bread, sweet and spicy. It made his mouth water. He nibbled one corner, swallowed, and mentally followed it down to his stomach. Mem had taught him how to check strange foods. His stomach juices flowed as they should. She'd said there was more than this to testing food, but it was a start.

The stuff was delicious. Dev ate the rest of it.

Then he dug in the deep pocket of his rough-weave coveralls. He'd snuck outdoors to collect crism crystals. He often came home with a pocketful, and Mem had never thrown any away. She'd said they were worth a lot, back on Chandrila. That'd made him hope they'd go home someday.

Rolling six crystals on his palm, he picked out the largest — a beauty, almost as big around as his wrist. He spat on it, rubbed it on his pants, then pocketed the others. He waved his palm back and forth, showing it off. The aliens' tails came up as they stuck their heads forward. Dev held up the crystal and squinted through it at the sun, to show them it was to look at, not eat. Then he handed it over.

The closest alien took it, held it up, and squinted with three eyelids. A forked black tongue snaked out of its nose and flicked the crystal. Dev almost gagged, seeing that. But this was an alien. Its parts weren't necessarily where humans' were. He must respect aliens. Mem had said so.

It dropped Dev's crystal into its pouch.

Dev bowed again.

Two of the other creatures twooted. One waved its short arms, turned around, and started scrambling up a long cut in the ravine's wall. This must be where they'd gotten down. Its tail wagged as it

walked, and its head bobbed forward and back. They didn't seem to want to hurt him. If these weren't invaders after all, he might be their first guest.

• • •

Ydra remembered falling on her face and a weird, poisonous smell. She remembered coming back to life sitting up, struggling. Something had held her arms down.

Then pain had scalded her, like being turned inside out and being chopped into pieces.

The piece that was left was still trying to scream. She couldn't move. She was blind, deaf, and numb. Only her Force sense remained.

What she felt was impossible. She had been squeezed into long, thin coil. An overwhelming force yanked and straightened her. Ydra convulsed and shrank back into the coil. The power struck again — and sliced off another piece of her existence. She coiled. The power struck again. Sliced again.

The aliens. This was something they had done. Thinking hurt worse every moment. Soon, she would have to stop thinking too. Then there'd be only agony.

She stretched out into the Force, away from her prison coil. Out there, other human wills lay stretched taut on their chopping blocks. Another human — body and all — was being forced closer. The power pushed Ydra straight. Sliced. She shrank. The intact human vanished ... and another coil shrieked into existence.

The aliens were using bits of her — and others — to do this! Ydra tried every kind of resistance she could think of ... willing herself unconscious, trying to stop all motion of thought ... but nothing made any difference. This could not last. It would end. She would end.

Centuries passed — they seemed like centuries ...

Dev!

His presence pierced Ydra's stupor. He reached out too, surprised to find her here. Then confused. Ravenously hungry — with a stomachache.

They would make him a coil. He wasn't even resisting.

No! Her shriek shattered her prison. She exploded, sending shards of her will into three other circuits. A second explosion blasted her into another universe. One without pain ...

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Entechment Chief Yifaii raked his control board with two foreclaws. "These readings are preposterous."

The pale, immature human sat quietly on its entechment chair. "Mem?" it croaked, looking around with wide eyes as P'w'ecks continued to prep it.

Unit Commander Th'twirir! guessed it wanted more sweet *qrikki*. He'd lured it on board, then taken it to Ptellung's laboratory. Ptellung had stripped it, measured, and probed it; but even a cooperative specimen had only so many uses. It was Yifaii's property now.

"When it sat down, my circuits blew." Yifaii clicked his foreclaws. "Get it out of my suite. Recycle it." His P'w'ecks yanked connectors out of the creature's body.

"Mem?" A runnel of clear fluid ran down its face.

Th'twirir! hated to push it down the recycle chute. Humans had precisely the right kind of life energy for entechment. Maybe this one had extra. Obviously, it would give no trouble. It might warrant further study back on Lwhekk.

Th'twirir! beckoned. The creature croaked one more time and then followed, as docile as a hatchling.

Th'twirir! decided to give it to Yifaii's young assistant ... Firwurring.

☹

Last Strike at G'rho

Seni Kilwallen's wrist alarm woke her with a shock. She sat bolt upright in the tiny emergency shelter and the fresh wound near her abdomen burned. She'd been hit last night. It was far from healed, although if she was careful she might avoid aggravating it further ... at least long enough to complete today's mission.

Trig was gone now. His thermal blanket still faintly smelled like his body. She couldn't believe she'd been able to sleep. Hurrying, she gathered her supplies and her scattered wits.

Trig had left at sunset, carrying her wrist alarm's mate into the new Ssi-ruuvi entechment facility. The aliens' invasion fleet had moved on, leaving behind a large, strong presence to hold the planetary system. Meanwhile, Ssi-ruuvi patrols continued to sweep G'rho for humans, who vanished into that entechment dome and never reappeared. Trig's sister Ydra was probably enteched now, like thousands of others.

But the Underground hadn't given up. If the hideous new dome could be destroyed, some peacekeeping force might answer the human survivors' desperate transmissions for help, hopefully before they all passed inside those doors. After four months, G'rho's small Underground had shrunk to a few dozen soldiers.

Trig had set out on a mission to disable the dome, while Seni stayed behind to fly the lighter ... they were the only remaining qualified pilots, but if the dome was disabled, some of the others might be able to send out that distress comm. Her injury made her unable to carry out the ground portion of the mission, but Trig had volunteered: his abilities gave him a chance of success when so many others had failed.

Seni crept out into the night. Her Conjo lighter stood beside Trig's just downhill from their campsite, where she had painstakingly camouflaged it before she bedded down. Carefully she yanked cut brush off its wings. Despite her best efforts, she felt a sudden, painful tear in her side. She'd reopened the wound. She paused, pressing one hand to her side, hoping the pain would ease.

It didn't. She got back to work.

Gradually the fighter's dark wedge shape appeared. She'd trained on a less advanced model, and flying this skittish brute had been sheer joy. Gingerly, she climbed her cockpit ladder. It was a beautiful night for flying, clear with a billion stars.

She collapsed into the cockpit, slammed down the hatch, and peered out into darkness. Nothing moved. She tried feeling for presences, the way Trig had tried to teach her ... but he was the Force-sensitive one. He'd trained a bit, back on Chandrila, under an adept who'd vanished years ago. He'd begged her to keep his secret ... as if he'd needed to beg. If anything happened to Trig, she'd ... well, she'd rather die with him. They'd married two weeks before the Ssi-ruuk arrived, and they'd escaped the first vicious Ssi-ruuvi onslaught because Trig had been able to "see" the battle from both cockpits. Now they flew G'rho's last two Conjos.

If she could still fly! She refused to reexamine the wound — with no medkit for healing, the severity of the injury mattered little. Instead, she shut her eyes and concentrated on breathing steadily. It wasn't anything like what Trig could do, but it helped. Injured or not, she had to fly.

She buckled in and pulled on her helmet. Engines and ordnance banks rose to full power. She flicked off her brakes. Her little craft accelerated to takeoff velocity. Within seconds, she soared free of the long ravine and into the dark night sky.

• • •

Trig Kilwallen knelt in a cramped service room. It had taken all of his rudimentary Force abilities to steal into the dome and put down its shielding ... without a blaster. Ssi-ruuvi weapon scanners had caught all three Undergrounders who'd previously attempted this mission. He had volunteered to try breaking in unarmed, and now he must escape before Seni arrived and finished the job. Groping in darkness, he closed his hand on a small tool. Its grip didn't balance in his hand; it'd been designed for three-toed foreclaws. Tentatively he squeezed it. A blue-white light appeared at one end.

It was a fusion cutter, as he'd hoped. He tucked it into his belt and maneuvered closer to the doorway. He sensed no lizards close by. Reaching out to his limits, he tried to sample Seni's feelings ...

Her anguish bowled him over.

• • •

Soaring over hills covered with juvica scrub, Seni felt an abrupt, feathery touch that meant Trig was reaching toward her. Instantly, his curiosity turned to concern. She ignored the throbbing in her side, hoping to hide it from him, and squeezed her thoughts into a question: Had he escaped from the dome?

No — but the summons to strike was urgent and plain. Then, less intense, came steady, serious concern about her condition. She shouldn't be trying to fly a Conjo ...

... But there's no one else to do it. Seni scanned her sensors. The dome would reflect more starlight than rocks or scrub —

There! She doubled back in a wide arc and nosed down. She would hold back her missiles until Trig escaped. Allegedly the dome had only a force shield, and no anti-air ordnance.

She'd soon find out. She opened fire with dual laser cannon. Durasteel melted in front of her sensors, splitting the dome like an overripe fruit. Grinning, she pulled up.

Then she began to pay for her insistence on flying wounded. G-forces drove her upper body downward, tearing the wound even deeper. She fought blinding pain and cut speed, banking to starboard.

• • •

Trig had taken blaster fire once, just before flying a mission. It'd just about crippled his reflexes. He closed off his awareness of Seni's pain and her anxiety. Sprinting up the corridor to the dome's outer wall, he drew the fusion cutter — got a good grip — and made three long slices in a metal service door.

That cut a large triangle. He kicked it outward

and peered through. The Conjo's roar faded as Seni swung out to pass again. From deeper in the dome echoed a wild chorus of hoots, grunts, and tweets. Trig flattened himself against a silvery wall. The lizards hadn't fired at Seni; evidently the Underground had kept its strike capability secret. Until now. *If we fail, there'll be no second attack.*

Against the stars, a tiny black wedge banked back toward the dome. He felt Seni's determination. The speck dove and spit laser fire. He ducked, shielding his eyes and ears.

The roar died away. Time to get out —

He sensed someone and spun around. Two brown lizards — P'w'ecks, not the larger master race — dashed toward him. They fired diffused stun bolts as they came.

He leaped through the improvised door and crouched. Then he squeezed the fusion cutter.

A P'w'eck thrust its head through the opening. Trig split it with the cutter, then lost his grip. The cutter tumbled away in the darkness. Instead of looking down for it, he searched the sky. Seni had vanished. She must be coming back low.

A second P'w'eck jumped through. Trig shrank away. But instead of firing at him, it dashed tail-awag toward a blocky outbuilding. Was it seeking shelter, or was that a defense post?

Trig wished in vain for a blaster, then realized the lizard wouldn't have time to fire. Seni's pain grew in his mind. She was back.

• • •

Seni held course by sheer determination. Part of the dome stood open to the sky now, and something inhuman dashed toward an outbuilding. She opened up with the lasers. Her course cut another slice through the dome and ended at the block-shaped hut.

• • •

Trig huddled, shielding his eyes ... but even through his eyelids, he'd seen the flash. The outbuilding had housed ordnance, all right. *Good shot! Finish!*

But when he sampled her pain, he realized she'd never survive two more passes. One more might kill her. He dashed for the thin cover of a juvica copse, and as his eyes readjusted to darkness, he watched her make a slow, level curve out. He must strengthen her. Did he remember how?

• • •

Seni gritted her teeth, anxious to get on with it. Forgetting for a moment that she wasn't in her old trainer, she throttled a lateral thruster too hard. The horizon spun. She nearly blacked out.

Something outside sucked out most of her pain. *Thanks ... Trig*, she thought wearily. She fought the fighter back onto vector. This pass, she must drop the load. It was getting hard to breathe. She dove at a sharper angle than before. She would have to pull up hard to escape the fireball. It would hurt like nothing she'd ever known. Pushing away fear, she slid the gravidic control to maximum and nosed downward. If she bought it on this pass, she bought it. Trig would help if he could.

• • •

Trig sprinted through a grove of scraggly trees. He felt her determination, and an anger that was so fierce it approached hatred. He followed her dive with battle-trained ears. When the missiles shrieked away, he dove for rough ground and buried his head under both arms. Then he focused his will and tried to shield Seni from her own pain.

• • •

Seni braced herself, exhaled, and mumbled a quick prayer — all in half a second. Then she wrenched the control yoke.

G-forces squashed her. Pain blinded her ... but she gained altitude. She released the yoke and throttle. Pressure eased off. She pried her eyes open. A fireball lit her aft sensor. Victory ...

But dearly bought. Stars disappeared at the edge of her field of vision, narrowing it to a tunnel. Within seconds, she'd be blind. Then unconscious.

She couldn't land back at the Underground's hidden base for fear of leading the lizards there. G'rho's eroded plains opened out west of the juvica scrub. She pushed the control yoke westward and then flailed for the landing cycle switch. The autopilot might get her down safely.

Her last thought was another prayer: *If I survive this landing, let Trig find me before the Ssi-ruuk do ...*

☹



34:2:4/IHV/G2Q1/TIM.3.TAD/MIL

Terrorist Rebels Raid G'rho

Tadarc, Timora

The colony world G'rho is the latest victim of Rebel terrorism. The self-styled "Rebel Alliance" struck G'rho's only settlement shortly after dawn, systematically slaughtering all colonists.

The single Imperial system defense vessel at G'rho was outside the system, responding to a distress call apparently faked by the terrorists. The small force of atmospheric defense fighters was quickly eliminated by Rebel terrorists.

G'rho, a planet in remote regions of the Outer Rim Territories, was a source of quaint textiles. Most colonists were simple artisans and craft makers; the planet had little military significance.

In a most unusual move, the terrorist forces have apparently taken the bodies of their victims with them. It is believed that the terrorists intended to garner more attention by hiding the bodies, although according to Imperial Navy sources, "the only result of this act of terrorism will be the alienation of the very people these 'Alliance' thugs seek support from; the families of the victims will, in all probability, ensure that the terrorists' demands will never be met."

The Rebels' motivation for the attack is unknown; it was apparently intended to shock and disgust. The attack's brutality has outraged many; no survivors have been found. Aides to Emperor Palpatine have stated that "... his Highness is shocked and appalled at the senseless nature of the attack. No effort will be spared to apprehend all the terrorists involved."

At this time, no arrests have been made, although sources close to the investigation insist that agents are following a number of leads and "arrests will be made in short order."

— Imperial HoloVision

Illustrated Guide: Tatooine

Two suns burn down on the planet Tatooine, rising and setting over the harsh desert landscape. The system contains the binary stars Tatoo I and Tatoo II, similar yellow G1 and G2 stars that would have made for a pleasant climate...if the planet had not orbited on the hot inner edge of the life zone.

One can find this information in any star gazetteer. But I wanted to know more, not just a list of statistics and astronomical quantities. I wanted to know the real Tatooine, this place of mystery. And because of my unique biology, I could discover knowledge hidden from even the best anthropologists and survey teams. I could observe like the proverbial mace fly on the wall.

Other members of my shape-changing race have given my entire species a disreputable air. My people are most commonly thought of as spies and assassins, able to disguise themselves and blend in with any group of sentients. We can fog the minds of those around us, erasing suspicions and distracting people from asking embarrassing questions. Naturally, we are greatly sought after by powerful crime lords as well as the Empire itself for espionage and covert operations.

I have chosen, however, to turn my skills to the advancement of knowledge. As an "invisible" anthropologist, I am able to blend in with any culture and observe it from the inside, discovering valuable details hidden from blundering, intrusive teams with their electronic imagers and keypads and blunt questions.

No, I work alone. I slip in and play my role. I watch, and learn.

I reached Tatooine by impersonating a crew member on a long-distance cargo hauler. With my abilities of distraction, I made sure no one particularly noticed me or realized that I seemed to have no defined duties. I wasn't there to deceive anyone. I just wanted passage to the planet, where I could begin my studies.

During the brief passage, I reviewed what other

databases already contained about the arid desert planet. Much of the information was dry and uninspired, as if the original survey teams had not been much interested in the place, and no one had bothered to expand the write-ups.

Tatooine has the fortune—or *misfortune*, some might say after learning of the planet's tortured history—of being located in the remote Outer Rim, yet near a prime nexus of hyperspace routes. This makes the planet easy to get to...but nobody particularly wants to go there. Given the world's low profile and strategic location, a significant amount of smuggler traffic has always passed through the Tatooine system—even before the recent Imperial crackdown on commercial spice freighting.

Tatooine has been settled by outside colonists for only a few hundred years; but in that time the desert world has been the site of countless battles between rival gangsters and smuggling lords.

According to anecdotal reports, the uncharted landscape is scattered with the debris from burning ships, crashed fighters, and the broken hulks of mercenary battle cruisers. Scavenger races in the desert arm themselves with all manner of weaponry, from archaic bombs and projectile weapons to contraband double-blasters dumped by gunrunners fleeing the Empire.

As we approached the silent, orange-tan sphere of Tatooine, I stood on the observation deck, completely unnoticed, while the other crew members bustled about in their preparatory work for landing. The planet looked stained and desolate, practically featureless, blazing in the reflected light from its double suns.

The geography of Tatooine has never been precisely mapped, probably because no one really cares. The planet is sparsely inhabited with well-defined settlements and holds few resources of galactic interest. Titanic sandstorms roar across the face of Tatooine every year, altering the landscape and erasing landmarks.

From my vantage at the observation windows, I watched one of Tatooine's few prominent features orbit beneath our ship—the wide expanse of the

Dune Sea, a harsh basin left from the drying of an ancient ocean. I had seen grainy images showing how the alkaline sands glitter under the binary sunlight, without so much as a rock outcropping to break the monotony for kilometers.

Bordering the Dune Sea lay the badlands of the Jundland Wastes, rocky canyons and mesas in which roam the Sand People, or Tusken Raiders, a violent and secretive race who inspire fear among the local settlers. The caves and crannies in the Jundland Wastes supposedly house an unknown number of fugitives, hermits, and marauders. I had also read overblown, boastful reports of local flyers who spent their free time practicing aerial combat and gunnery skills in the steep and winding gorges, such as Beggar's Canyon.

I couldn't wait to get to work down there. I was ready for anything.

We landed in the seedy spaceport of Mos Eisley—Tatooine's only "big city"—which seemed

identical to a thousand other spaceports on a thousand other backwater worlds. I overheard one of the crew members muttering that the place was a "wretched hive of scum and villainy," but that didn't seem to bother him in the least.

After the long-distance cargo hauler had landed in one of the docking bays, I slipped off the ship. No one noticed me, and no one would ever remember me. With my slim electronic notepad in hand, I entered the city, eager to jot down my impressions.

Mos Eisley is a haphazard array of low, gray steelcrete structures and semidomes at the bottom of a wide, windy basin surrounded by bluffs.

Large, shabby spaceship hangars line the actual spaceport district near the Spaceport Traffic Control Tower, the beacon that guides shuttles and small cruisers down to land. Because of the small amount of "official" traffic, the traffic control tower rarely does anything beyond negotiating landing fees at the various docking bays. Unofficial traffic usually consists of smugglers hauling glitterstim or ryll

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spice or other contraband through the black-market centers on Tatooine.

In the town center I found the large wreck of a crashed spacecraft, the *Dowager Queen*, a mess of tangled girders and falling-apart hull plates that had been picked over by generations of scavengers. From what I could tell, the wreck provided a home for all manner of strange creatures, vagrants, and scavengers lurking inside the cool shadows.

Near the center of the dusty town, I saw the corroded hulk of a large space freighter half-buried in the sands, much more intact than the *Dowager Queen*. From the visitors' information I had taken from the docking bay, I recognized this as the *Lucky Despot*, a ship no longer spaceworthy that had been converted into a hotel and casino, now run by the long-faced, tusked Whiphid female, the Lady Valarian, reputed to be one of the powerful crime lords on Tatooine.

Officially, Imperial law is enforced on Tatooine through a small contingent of stormtroopers; however, it is obvious the Empire does not consider the place worth a major effort. The man in charge, Prefect Talmont, seems to spend most of his time trying to get himself reassigned, ignoring the blatant crime in the streets of Mos Eisley.

It took little time for me to pick up details of how this city works. Much of the business—legal or otherwise—is conducted in the seedy cantinas near the docking bays. Like all spaceports, Mos Eisley is a melting pot of sentient creatures, from honest traders to fugitives to bounty hunters. Many of the inhabitants have taken up spying as a profession, keeping careful tabs on every being who comes and goes, hoping to find someone else willing to pay for

the information they've gathered.

An efficient network of brokers connecting buyers and sellers has fallen into place. If you need to hire a starship or a guide, you can find the right person by asking a few discreet questions. If you need to sell illegal imported weaponry or buy a personal supply of glitterstim, someone will take care of you.

Most of the businessmen in Mos Eisley have become accustomed to bribing Prefect Talmont or other city officials to avoid being harassed about permits or code compliance. Though many of the people there have no love for the Empire, the stormtrooper outpost is considered a necessary evil. With the influx of regular water tankers and supply ships to stock the garrison, the standard of living in Mos Eisley is now higher than it has ever been.

I spent only a day in this city, since Mos Eisley interested me little. I wanted to go out and see the real Tatooine.

As a stepping-stone to the great barren wilderness, I traveled to one of the smaller settlements, Anchorhead, which serves as a central trading point for moisture farmers and others eking out a living on the edge of the Dune Sea. It was once the site of a deep, reliable well frequented by pilgrims crossing the wasteland, but the well has long since dried up.

Many support services survive in Anchorhead, but the economy is tied directly to the vagaries of the desert air. When the wind blows hotter and drier than usual, decreasing the water harvest, the crops wane, credit accounts get thinner, and everyone suffers.

With the automation of vaporators and reclamation systems, the younger generation often has little to do except dream about the lives they could have had elsewhere in the galaxy. I infiltrated a group of teenagers near the popular hangout of Tosche Station, a power and water distribution complex, and listened to their rebellious dreams of running away from home, making their way to Mos Eisley, and finding a ride that would take them to the Imperial Academy. Their impossible but heartfelt talk disturbed me, though, and I made my way out of Anchorhead toward one of the outlying moisture farmer settlements.

On a desert planet such as Tatooine, the most precious commodity is water. The people who have adapted to the arid conditions have developed drastic measures to acquire and conserve water. Living in underground dwellings, moisture farmers deploy water collection devices of all kinds along the broad perimeters of their stake, harvesting the scant droplets and hoarding them in armored underground holding tanks.

Posing as a hired hand who had lived with them for the past season, I stayed with one such family for a week. I observed their daily routine and how the moisture farmer's very existence is tied to barely functional technology, the best equipment they can scrounge on such an out-of-the-way planet.

The most common water collection device is the vaporator: three meters tall and made of multiple refrigerated cylinders. The hot wind of Tatooine blows through the open tubes, and the vital moisture condenses out upon striking the chilled metal surface. All day long, drop by drop, the distilled water fills small catchbasins buried in the base unit beneath each vaporator.

Some sophisticated-model vaporators can adapt to wind speeds, external temperature, and moisture of scuttling womp rats, camouflaged as gray-brown boulders while they foraged along canyon bottoms. From my initial eavesdropping in Mos Eisley, I knew that though they are slow movers, the womp rats' relative invisibility has made them favorite practice targets for flyers and stormtroopers, and these creatures are becoming increasingly scarce.

Herbivorous reptilian dewbacks are used by moisture farmers as beasts of burden and by desert stormtroopers as patrol animals. Though sluggish in the cool of the night, dewbacks can be urged to bursts of great loping speed in the daytime heat. At full run, they have been able to pace landspeeders for a short distance—and (I heard one stormtrooper say), unlike mechanical vehicles, dewbacks do not break down in sandstorms.

Herds of furry, shuttle-sized banthas run wild in the badlands of Tatooine.

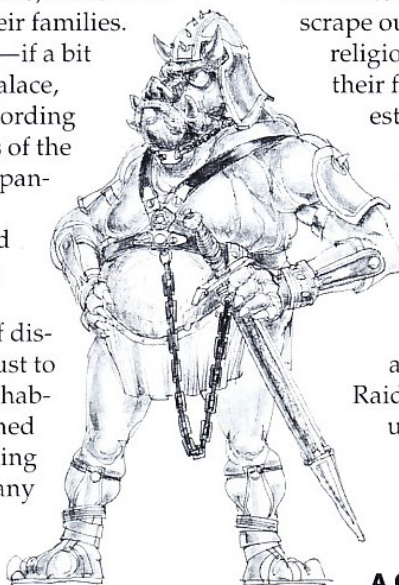
While passing through Anchorhead nearly two weeks earlier, I had heard the tale of one trader who had attempted to sell captured Tusken banthas as beasts of burden; but the banthas became listless and could not be trained to perform even simple duties, though the animals are thought to be quite intelligent. Not until I saw how the Sand People domesticate wild banthas in a strange familial relationship did I understand why the trader had encountered so many difficulties.

After some time surviving alone in the desert, wishing again for the companionship of other sentient beings (as well as the amenities civilization

offers), I came upon a towering citadel at the far edge of the Dune Sea. I had not come here consciously, but I counted myself very fortunate to come upon the imposing palace currently owned by the gangster and smuggling kingpin Jabba the Hutt.

Currently an odd assortment of creatures, clingers, “business associates,” sycophants, and slaves live in Jabba’s palace, along with their families. Gamorrean guards are totally loyal—if a bit unimaginative—defenders of the palace, while their wives spend their days lording over their households in other parts of the palace. Among Jabba’s strange companions are never-before-seen species, bounty hunters, and assassins found only on wanted posters throughout the galaxy.

I was forced to use my abilities of disguise and deception to the utmost just to divert attention from myself. The inhabitants of Jabba’s palace are accustomed to suspecting everyone and everything because they are embroiled in so many plots. Reading their thoughts and learning their intended plots made me literally dizzy as I went about



A Gamorrean guard in full work regalia.

studying the palace itself and its history—which I found far more interesting than the petty under-world squabbles.

The enormous citadel has actually been on Tatooine for centuries, as was obvious from the generational structure of the outside, with modifications and additions constructed over the years. Centuries before a few hardy colonists arrived to scrape out a living in the desert, the mysterious religious order of the B’omarr monks moved their followers to Tatooine. Out in the harshest wastelands, the monks sought a place of suitable isolation among the crags; there, over the generations, the monks carved for themselves a labyrinthine palace of grim solitude.

A legend dimmed by time claims that the monks built their fortress in this area of Tatooine with some assistance from roving bands of Tusken Raiders, though I encountered no one who understood the connection between the Sand People and the B’omarr order. Occasionally, though, the grim and mysterious Tusken Raiders will

ride their banthas to the gate of the palace and just stare, making no attempt to communicate, and then they depart as silently as they have come.

It frightened me to discover that the B’omarr monks saw through my deception with ease and observed my real nature. I could keep no secrets from them—but they did not seem to care. They accepted my presence as part of the natural order of things.

The belief system of the B’omarr monks is centered on physical denial; by cutting themselves off from all sensation, they can focus and enhance the power of the mind, embarking on journeys made possible through inner space. Thus the rugged, unwelcoming climate of Tatooine seemed a perfect exile to them.

Once built, the citadel remained silent and mysterious, mostly hidden within the rock face, showing only battlements and great doors from the outside. Seeing the huge gates, travelers across the desert often wondered what might be hidden inside. The dark silhouetted forms occasionally seen on the

ramparts never spoke, never gestured in greeting.

Over the years the B’omarr monks had no contact whatsoever with the local moisture farmers or representatives from other religious orders, such as the bantha-worshiping Dim-U monks in Mos Eisley.

The inner citadel of the monastery was so vast and empty, and the place so isolated, that renegades and smugglers soon broke in and became squatters in abandoned alcoves and corridors.

The first usurper to occupy the B’omarr monastery was the great bandit Alkhara, who once allied himself with the Sand People to wipe out a small police garrison near the former capital of Tatooine, and then butchered the Sand People who had helped him—thereby beginning the centuries-long blood feud the Tusken Raiders have toward humans.

Alkhara and his band fled into the desert from military retribution and stormed the citadel, intending to take it as a place against siege. He was surprised to find the gates unlocked, and the monks were unimpressed by his arrival. One of the monks apparently told Alkhara to make himself at home and stay as long as he liked. The monks themselves had other concerns.

B’omarr acolytes rarely speak to each other, pondering their own philosophies, except during times when they all sit in tea-rooms and sip their only

nourishment, a potent tea made from herbs stored in caches somewhere in the citadel. During this time, the monks talk in snatches of conversation, entire lectures boiled down to an obscure word or phrase that they somehow seem to understand. I listened in on one of these abbreviated, esoteric conversations and walked away shaking my head, unable to fathom just how the palace's monks could be communicating.

The higher up the monks went in their studies, the fewer words they used and the less they moved...the less they needed their own bodies. Even with all the shocking things I have seen in my varied anthropological investigations, I was still shocked to discover the monastery's horrible secret.

When a B'omarr monk reaches the stage of final enlightenment, he has no further use for his body, his eyes, his ears, his senses. Nothing at all. The monk has achieved a stage of pure mental power, at one with the cosmos. When this occurs, the other, "lesser" monks help the enlightened one to shed his body, *surgically*. The enlightened brain is removed and placed in a nutrient-filled jar, forever freed from the distractions of the flesh and able to spend the years in perpetual thought. The monks showed me their wall cases filled with brain jars as they proudly explained their technique.

Even these enlightened brains still occasionally have business to attend to along the monastery corridors. Mechanical, spiderlike walking legs are available if ever an enlightened one feels the need to "go for a walk." Telepathically, the brain in a jar summons the walking legs, which approach the storage alcoves, pick up the appropriate brain jar, and attach it under the walking legs. When such a mechanical walker comes clicking along the corridors, the other B'omarr monks give it a wide, reverent berth, as did I.

Recently it has been said that Jabba the Hutt captured one of his rivals and, as punishment, demanded that the monks surgically "shed" his body and place his brain in a jar among their own. For his own amusement, Jabba wanted to see whether the hapless enemy would survive. Unfortunately for

the victim, he did. Now, blind, confused, and unable to communicate, this brain has commandeered a set of the spider legs and wanders the palace, lost and without purpose.

When the monks graciously offered to help me on the way to my own enlightenment, I declined—perhaps a bit too vehemently—and decided I would be safer in the upper levels of Jabba the Hutt's palace, among the cutthroats, bounty hunters, and assassins.

The bandit Alkhara used the citadel as his headquarters for thirty-four years, improving many of the rugged corridors and great halls. His followers fixed many of the living quarters and added a deep network of dungeons and underground chambers, which the monks adored. So vast was the citadel and so few were the monks that they rarely noticed their unwanted visitors were even there.

Over the years other bandits, revolutionaries, and crime lords took over the B'omarr monastery, occupying it under the same terms. In payment for this lodging and protection, the visitors each built another portion onto the sprawling complex: perhaps a cistern in the bluffs beneath the palace, an observation tower, or more extensive dungeons.

Jabba the Hutt has been the most recent and extravagant follower of this tradition, converting the rugged facades into a towering but elegant palace built out of sandrock reinforced by ditanium plating and reflective shielding.

Jabba constructed a vast hangar wing and garage to house his sail barge along with the sandskimmers and other vehicles. The Hutt and his retinue frequently go out across the sands on pleasure rides—usually to watch hapless victims die in various ways out in the desert.

One of his favorite styles of execution is to toss his prisoners into the gullet of a strange and fearsome creature, the Sarlacc, which makes its nesting place at the bottom of a slippery-sided basin called the Great Pit of Carkoon. The only portion of the sand dwelling creature visible aboveground is its pink, mucus-lined mouth opening, more than two meters in diameter.

Tentacular appendages can whip out and snare spectators from the rim of the pit, and inward-pointing spearlike teeth make escape impossible. Though the Sarlacc does not get frequent prey, its extremely long digestive cycle sustains it through

lean times. Legend has it that the Sarlacc may bear a rudimentary intelligence, and that it intentionally keeps its victims alive for a hideous sort of companionship even as it feeds on them.

Much as he enjoys feeding the Sarlacc, though, Jabba seems prouder still of his pet monster, the rancor, which he keeps in a slimy, dank pit beneath his throne room. The rancor is one of the most hideous beasts I have ever encountered, best described as a walking collection of fangs and claws, with no thought other than to kill and eat. Jabba frequently delights in plunging random cronies or unwanted guests through a trapdoor just to watch their death struggles.

After some time surrounded by the Hutt's weak-minded cronies with their poisoned thoughts, I found myself being looked at with more and more suspicion. Everyone, it seemed, had plans in motion to kill Jabba, and the Hutt himself seemed able to resist some of my mind-muddling attempts.

When a passing group of chittering, hooded Jawas took their leave of Jabba's palace to continue their endless scavenging journey across the sands, I joined them in their sandcrawler. I was glad to get out of there, before Jabba fed me to his rancor just to see what color my blood really is.

After spending days in the fearsome cesspit of Jabba's palace, I found the company of the Jawas quite refreshing. The Jawas are a small-statured, rodentlike people, hardworking but eager to take advantage of any opportunity they spot. They have earned their place as Tatooine's master scavengers, salvagers, and tinkers.

Our sandcrawler ground its way across the Dune Sea, leaving broad tracks across the sand. A team of hooded spotters stared out the narrow window high up on the pilot's observation bridge. With their glowing yellow eyes, they searched for any usable garbage exposed by time and weather. After I had quickly assimilated their language, I heard some of the clan members speak of foolhardy Jawa family units that actually venture out during sandwhirl season, tracking the paths of the great storms to see what the winds and scouring dust uncover.

The Dune Sea is studded with the crashed hulks of spacecraft from centuries of warfare. Escape pods, shuttlecraft, attack cruisers, even luxury passenger liners have been buried under the desert. The Jawas find them.

One of their legends tells of a huge Old Republic water tanker that soft-landed out in the desert, its crew killed by a poison gas leaking from a cracked hyperdrive chamber. Any Jawa expedition that finds this wrecked tanker with its cargo holds unbreached would be wealthier than even Jabba the Hutt.

Jawa resourcefulness can be seen in their ability to survive by picking over wreckage and debris long since discarded by other races. These little people can make workable devices from the most corroded components, the most battered engines.

Decades ago the Jawas took their sandcrawlers from a fleet of abandoned ore-hauler vehicles, left behind as junk from a failed mining expedition in the days before Tatooine was colonized. Each sandcrawler started out looking identical, but more than a century of repairs, embellishments, and quick fixes cobbled together from the engines and hull plates of other excavated wrecks has given them an individualistic appearance. The mechanical drives are steam-powered nuclear fusion engines, sufficient to propel the giant vehicles across the desert for centuries to come.

As an anthropologist, I found the Jawa social structure fascinating. About half of each clan spends time out in the sandcrawlers scavenging, while the remainder of the family unit lives in thick-walled fortresses erected for protection against attacks by Tusken Raiders or ferocious predators such as krayt dragons. The walls of these fortresses are made from large chunks of wrecked spacecraft, pitted and corroded by the desert winds.

Posing as a member of the Nkik clan, I made the journey from Jabba's palace in our sandcrawler. Over the course of the previous year, the vehicle had made a great circular sweep across the desert landscape, crisscrossing swaths across the empty wastelands, searching for any useful item. About half the volume of a sandcrawler is used for cargo space, storage areas to hold the junk the Jawas have managed to collect during their journey. The rest of the sandcrawler contains workshops where Jawas tinker with and repair their prizes.

Only a small amount of space is wasted on amenities for the crew and the pilot's compartment. The Jawas are expected to sleep six in a cabin the size of a closet. When not working, they strap themselves upright into coffinlike cubicles for peace and solitude—of which they need little because their family units are accustomed to being close.

Jawa sandcrawlers roam the edges of civilization on Tatooine. Emissaries from the family unit seek to barter with moisture farmers, trying to sell reconditioned droids, asking to buy malfunctioning equipment or scrap metal. They usually manage to acquire discarded items for very few credits, which they then fix and sell again,

although I understand that humans do not like to deal with Jawas because of their offensive smell. Master tinkers, Jawas know how to make their wares work *just enough* that they can sell them, knowing they will be long gone before an item breaks down again.

The Nkik clan seemed relieved to be leaving Jabba's palace, though, because of a grim incident that befell another group of Jawas. The Rkok clan foolishly unloaded a cargo of questionable merchandise on Jabba the Hutt, who was neither pleased nor forgiving. The Nkik clan later found the smoking hulk of their brothers' sandcrawler utterly destroyed out in the Dune Sea, with no Jawas to be found, only a few torn brown Jawa cloaks blowing around the lip of the Great Pit of Carkoon. The stench of Jawa terror clung to the golden sands, and the hideous Sarlacc appeared to have feasted....

We spent days out on the desert, driving and searching, driving and searching, until finally we entered more rugged territory and suddenly came upon the family fortress. The sandcrawler spent days unloading treasures behind the safety of the thick fortress walls, where the rest of the family members sorted and assessed the wealth. I even deigned to help a little bit as I continued my observations.

While many of the sandcrawler crew members were proficient at repairing equipment, I realized that most of the true experts remained inside the fortress, working at the items the crew members could not fix. For truly unsalvageable debris, the Jawas have highly efficient solar smelters to melt down the junk and process the raw metal into ingots.

Jawa society is tightly knit, with large family units spreading out along tangled family trees. In their chattering language, the Jawas have forty-three different terms to describe relations and lineage, such as *father's-sister's-son's-son-by-second-wife*, and so on. Bloodlines are carefully recorded, though, and Jawa families are not interbred; each family unit mingles its marriage line with other Jawa groups.

As I lived invisibly among them, I learned of an impending celebration, the greatest event in the Jawa calendar: the great swap meet. Once each year, just before the storm season, Jawas from across the

continent make a pilgrimage to the great basin of the Dune Sea for a huge, secret rendezvous, "the greatest swap meet in the galaxy." Here Jawas exchange salvaged items, haggling and trying to outsmart each other. Jawas can find missing components to otherwise repaired items, tell stories, and even exchange sons and daughters as "marriage merchandise" with much dickering over bloodlines and how the family unit will be strengthened by the union.

Though I eagerly looked forward to this exciting opportunity to see Jawa culture in its purest form, my time among them was destined to be cut short by an exciting turn of events.

The Jawas are a skittish people, downtrodden and preyed upon by their enemies for as long as they can remember. Even in their heavily defended fortresses they post regular guards to watch for impending attacks—but unfortunately, even with the diligence of the Jawas, it turned out that the Sand People were stealthier warriors.

Appearing out of nowhere, it seemed, a Tusken war party attacked in the long shadows of first dawn, leading a thunderous group of banthas that rammed the crumbling walls until the armored plates fell away. The Sand People charged into the breach, wielding their long, sharp pikes called gaffi sticks. The banthas trampled the carefully sorted Jawa salvage material, and the Sand People howled as the panicked Jawas squealed and fled, making no attempt whatsoever to fight back.

The Sand People showed no interest in grabbing booty for themselves; they seemed intent merely on causing damage and maintaining the impression of fear usually associated with any mention of their vicious race.

I believed I had already learned much from the Nkik clan, and I doubted if I would ever again get the chance to spend time with the elusive Sand People. And so I became one, and followed the Tusken Raiders off to their secret encampments.

From speaking with the inhabitants of Mos Eisley and Anchorhead and the moisture farmer family, my impression was that the Tusken Raiders were called Sand People in a derogatory fashion, yet always the speakers' voices carried a hidden fear. The Sand People are violent, nomadic, and extremely mysterious. Roving in skilled hunting bands, they eke out a harsh life on the fringes of civ-

ilized areas, taking from the desert in good times, taking from other people in bad times.

Even as I departed the Jawa fortress with the victory cries echoing in my ears, I got the distinct impression that the Raiders sensed something amiss, though they could not pinpoint the source of their uneasiness. It took all my skill to divert their thoughts, and I knew then that this could be my greatest challenge—but ah, to be the first anthropologist in the galaxy ever to describe the Tusken Raiders from firsthand knowledge! It was a risk I was willing to take.

Tusken clans roam the deserts of Tatooine. The Sand People keep only meager possessions, which are considered a liability when they are moving across the burning sands, especially during flight from an enemy. The Tusken Raiders have built no permanent shelters, although I followed them to a traditional encampment among the rocky badlands in the Jundland Wastes, in an area called the Needles. These caves and fissures in the hot rock are sheltering places for Tusken clans during the sandstorm season.

Sand People have no compunctions about killing anything in battle, hand to hand, with primitive weapons, because that is the bravest way to fight. Tusken Raiders prefer, however, merely to subdue a captive and take him as a prisoner back to the encampment. There they will use the captive as part of their vicious “sport” and to hone their skills at inflicting pain on an enemy.

Tusken Raiders ride in single file to hide their numbers, and even though the deserts of Tatooine are flat and featureless, somehow they manage to sneak up on their prey—no simple thing while riding a huge bantha or other large desert creature! They demonstrated this skill amply with their attack on the Jawa fortress.

Though they are nomadic and have no permanent settlement, the Sand People allow no change in their lives. This perhaps explains their resistance against adopting high technology and against adapting to the new weapons they have been able to take from the stormtroopers and the outlying moisture farmers. They

rely instead on their wits and their “traditional” weapons: their gaderffii, or gaffi sticks—double-edged spear-axes made from scavenged metal—and an occasional blaster rifle.

The more time I spent observing these strange people, the more I grew to admire them, in an analytical sort of way, of course. Their cultural heritage is rich and rigid, unchanged after many difficult centuries on Tatooine.

I learned how important “coming of age” is to the Sand People. Children are guarded by the adult

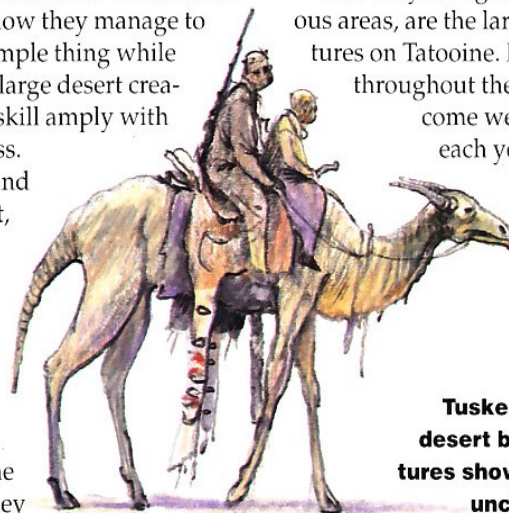
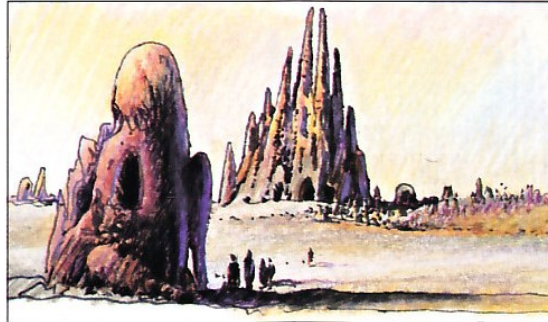
Tuskens, but youngsters are not considered truly “people” until they have endured the ceremonies that make them valuable adults. Many babies die because of difficult desert conditions, and the Sand People take great pride in knowing that only the strongest reach adulthood—and fewer still survive

the rigorous rites of passage.

To earn a place among the Tusken adults, a candidate must perform some great feat of skill or prowess, the magnitude of which determines his or her station among the clans. A common adventure involves ambushing stormtrooper squadrons and taking home their armor as trophies.

Tusken lore has it that four youths once banded together and single-handedly slew a krayt dragon without bantha assistance. Many other Tusken youths have attempted the same feat, with predictably gruesome results. Judging from the size of a single krayt dragon skeleton I saw atop a dune during my solitary journeys, these monsters must be formidable indeed.

The krayt dragons, usually found in mountainous areas, are the largest and most feared of all creatures on Tatooine. Krayt dragons continue to grow throughout their lifetimes, and they do not become weaker with age. At high summer each year, the mountains ring with the bellowed challenges of krayt dragons. Upon hearing a nearby dragon mating cry, all wise people flee—because a dragon in such a frenzy kills everything within reach.



Tusken Raiders ride any serviceable desert beasts, such as the rangy creatures shown at left, to reach remote and uncharted encampments (above).

From early childhood, the Sand People wrap themselves in ritual rags and protective gear. They wear loose and flowing robes, letting no part of themselves show. They see through eye filters protruding from their bandaged faces; across their mouths they wear breath masks to filter sand particles.

Tuskens make no distinction between males and females, and only the clan elders keep records of the sexes, so that they can arrange marriages. (As one can imagine, some rather embarrassing mistakes have been made, unfortunately.)

Once each year, all newly recognized adults are assigned mates. In a bonding ceremony that involves mixing the blood of husband and wife, and of their respective bantha mounts, they become joined for life. Sheltered in the privacy of their tent, the new husband and wife are allowed to unwrap the bindings from their faces and view their true selves. Then, for the rest of their lives, only a Tusken's mate is allowed to know his or her true appearance. Matters of personal hygiene are attended to in the utmost privacy; one Tusken seeing another's face, even accidentally, is cause for a blood duel. I took great care to keep my distance.

Much to my amazement, I learned that the Sand People have developed a tight symbiosis with the huge, hairy banthas, an emotional bond stronger than any I have previously seen between master and beast.

Banthas may be intelligent, although in captivity they have never shown any signs of communication or behavior beyond that of a domesticated beast of burden. Wild banthas also show no initiative other than a kind of feral violence toward their captors. However, I was amazed to see that among the Sand People banthas act much differently.

Tusken children tend young banthas, but upon reaching adulthood, one Tusken and one bantha team up in a kind of deep emotional bonding, as strong as a marriage. It is as if bantha and rider become extensions of the same person. When a Tusken is killed, the suddenly "widowed" bantha will fly into a vicious suicidal frenzy; the same is true if a bantha mount is killed, leaving the rider alive.

If a bantha is left without its Tusken companion, the Sand People turn the bantha out into the desert to survive alone. Likewise, when a bantha is killed, the bereaved Tusken wanders off into the desert on a vision quest. There the Tusken must come to terms with the spirit of his bantha partner—if the bantha partner wishes to drag his companion into the afterlife, then the Tusken will die out on the sands. If, however, the bantha spirit guide is generous, he will lead the Tusken to another wild bantha, a riderless bantha, whom the Tusken will take back to the tribe as a new companion. When such a Tusken returns "reborn," he is much esteemed by the other Sand People.

Tusken Raiders have no written language, relying instead on long and complex chants to keep track of their lineage and of their legends. Handing their chants down from generation to generation, they remember the great and devastating space battles that laid waste much of Tatooine and strewn the desert with wrecked battleships.

The most revered person in the camp is the storyteller, whose duty is to retell the old tales, allowing no word to be changed. It is the storyteller who chronicles the coming-of-age stories of each member of the clan; once he tells the tale the first time, not one word is allowed to deviate—not ever. This practice, which may sound harsh, makes an anthropologist want to jump for joy because the records are preserved intact from generation to generation, without the distortion that comes from sloppy mistakes.

The storyteller takes an apprentice and begins hammering in the vast amount of verbal knowledge. The apprentice is not allowed to recite any of this, or to practice out loud—since the words may *never* be spoken incorrectly, even during the learning process. When the apprentice feels he is ready to become the master, he is called upon to recite what he has learned. If the apprentice makes so much as one mistake, he is killed outright—it is blasphemy to speak the wrong words. If, however, the apprentice has learned every word, every tale, every lineage, then he becomes the tribe's next storyteller—and the old storyteller, no longer needed, wanders off alone into the desert to die.

This rigid and violent people, however, proved more volatile than even I had anticipated. Perhaps I erred, or I asked too many questions, or my smell wasn't quite right, or the Tuskens just decided to kill someone that day—but I found myself fleeing across the desert with my disguise in tatters as Sand People charged after me on their banthas, waving their wicked gaffi sticks at me.

I had little hope of surviving, but I continued to run in dismay, greatly disappointed that all my newly uncovered knowledge would not now be published and available to my colleagues. Nevertheless, I fled to the best of my ability.

By sheer luck I stumbled upon a deep desert stormtrooper patrol and, as a desperate ploy, made them think I was a lost comrade. They fought against the Tuskens and rescued me, at the cost of three of their own party.

They brought me back to Mos Eisley, where I now sit in a cantina writing this account, waiting for passage out of the system and back to where I can begin the lecture circuit, describing my adventures on this harsh world.

There are plenty of ships at the docking bays, but I want to find one with a reasonably good chance of not falling apart as soon as it enters hyperspace. As time goes by, though, I am growing less selective, anxious to be away from here.

I have had enough of Tatooine!

A Buyer's Guide To Alternative Starships

"Bweep! Twiddle twiddle! Gra-boop. Beedy-beedy-beedythu-wheep."

"For goodness sake, stop your chattering! He can't understand your chaotic jabbering."

"Bwa-thoop!"

"And don't start on me, either. Why I put up with your nonsense is quite beyond my capacity."

"Bwoop!"

"Oh ... switch off! Oh, not you Sir. I'm terribly sorry, Sir. You see, I was just talking to my counterpart here, actually, when my sensors failed to detect your approach."

("Beep heep heep heep heep ...")

"I fail to see the humor in this R2! Ahem. Sir, permit me to introduce myself. I am C-D20, human-cyborg relations. And this ..."

>thunk< *"Beeeeeeep!"*

"... is my counterpart, R2-RD, starship specifications astromech droid. Captain Antilles has mentioned your need for another freighter for this upcoming mission, and has assigned us to assist you. Our facilities are at your disposal. Which, if I may say, are quite extensive. I am fluent in over six-million forms of programming languages, including astrogation computers, diagnostic intelligences, and ..."

"Bwaap!"

"Yes, I was just getting to that, R2. I'm dreadfully sorry, Sir, but Ordnance and Supply seems to be fresh out of YT-1300 light freighters."

"Yes, Sir, I know it's the most popular light freighter. Yes Sir, I know it's infinitely modifiable. Sir ... Sir!"

"Rest easy, Sir, there are plenty of other freighters to choose from. I'm quite confident you'll find one to your liking. These starship engineers are quite clever, you know. Now, R2 ... R2?"

"Boop."

"R2-RD! Stop reprogramming that helpless power droid! Come over here and recall the starship databases."

"Ba-thweep?"

"The ones Commander Dauntarist just showed us, you malfunctioning little twerp! The reason why we're down in this hangar in the first place!"

"Wooooop. Beep-woop."

"That's better. Here it comes. Now, here's one that's similar to your YT-1300 in most respects. The HT-2200 medium freighter, by Corellian Engineering Corporation ..."

"Boowoo-eepp? Boowoo-eepp!"

"No, R2. I dare say I don't think he looks too pleased, either. Is there something wrong with this model, Sir?"

"Yes, Sir. Oh, I see. Yes, of course. I ... Yes, Sir. R2? Could you find something in your database that's not a ... 'guaranteed piracy target'?"

"Bwaaaap!"

"How am I supposed to know what that means?"

"Thuweep deep beep-eep."

"I know I'm the interpreter droid, you malfunctioning error! Just access the singularity you call your memory store and recall another starship!"

"I'm pleased that the most recent selection meets with your approval, Sir. Our inventory shows that the *Vorpal Demise*, a Starfeld ZH-25 Questor, is within our ship stores and is ready for your ..."

"Bwoop twiddle-twiddle ga-weep!"

"Oh, I'm sure they've fixed that by now, R2. Not repairing the collision chamber would be a rash ... Sir? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Bee wee! Boop tawEEP deep."

"Captain Antilles said that was a last resort! He said specifically that he didn't want us to assign another ship with an illegal weapon load-out! (Especially to another ... what did he say ... 'hair-on-plasma-fire' bush pilot?)"

"Kathweep doop feep."

"I really don't care if it would be fun! I'm certain that Sir is not interested in that kind of ruffian's rocket. I ... Sir? Oh, I, see. Yes, Sir. No, Sir. Of course I'll elaborate, Sir. (See what you've done R2? Now he insists on seeing it.)"

"Deep beep."

"Very well, though I think we're going to regret this. Permit me to introduce the *Interceptor*-class Arakyd Helix."

What You Don't Know ...

Debret stared at the stone-jawed Barabel, a two-meter-tall tower of muscle and bone, all without a sliver of emotion. No wonder they made such wonderful retainers.

"I was expecting to see Jarafoke here," she addressed it.

The Barabel might as well have been a statue. Its blaster rifle, held across its torso, didn't even move with the breath in its chest. The deadly silence between the two of them was broken only by the power converters refueling the *Starlady*.

She took a step away from her trusted Starfeld Z-10 Seeker. "I expect to know what I'm carrying," she demanded with arms akimbo.

Jarafoke's goon didn't even twitch.

A deep voice echoed from across the landing bay. "He has his orders, Courier Nightmoon. As do you."

She had never liked Quarren, and particularly not this one. Nopan was as attractive as a sea slug, and just as trustworthy. As it glided across the docking bay, it continued to quiver its myriad of mouth-tentacles while it spoke.

"And you would do best to follow them," he said with a tone of finality. Behind him, Debret noticed a Starfeld-compatible cargo module being repulsored in, no doubt from one of Jarafoke's private warehouses. She strutted over to the pod as it was raised into position. With a bolt of surprise, she noticed that the module lacked standard life-support connections. Zyom, she couldn't even see an airlock collar.

"A sealed cargo compartment?" Debret inquired. She looked over the pod in disbelief as she noted the sensor-defeating nutorium alloy plating. *This thing has a thicker skin than my ship*, she realized.

Although not a telepathic species, Nopan had guessed her thoughts. She felt his hideous presence draw nearer. "Jarafoke wishes to be sure that his interests remain a secret, even to you."

Debret knew those last three words were a threat. The only way she could determine her cargo in-flight would be to burn her way in, and that intrusion would be easily detected at her destination. Albeit a long shot, she decided to try the diplomatic approach and forced a half-smile, "What? Jarafoke doesn't trust me anymore?"

"Jarafoke's trust is not a term in his contract with you, Courier Nightmoon."

The intense hissing of therma-bonders announced that the installation of the enigmatic burden was complete.

Nopan's mouth tentacles quivered in a hideous representation of a sarcastic smirk. "And in this case, what you might know would most certainly hurt you."

Kizbon's Box

Resting his dark boots on the fire control pad, Larken glanced at the sensors. "Here comes our boy now."

A pinprick of light heralded the entry of a starship from hyperspace. The target, unaware of its classification as such, gently changed course toward the Darknon Space Station.

In the cockpit of the *Pillage*, Larken scratched his unshaven chin. *Easier than boiling Mon Cal*, he thought. He checked the status of the other two pirate ships. *Profit* and *Trust Me* were ahead of him by 20,000 kilometers, but were still protected by the sensor-blinding magnetic storm. Larken's job was to make sure their mark didn't double-back in an effort to escape, although he secretly hoped that the flyboy tried to do just that. Larken desperately thirsted to spill some blood himself. He gave a thumbs up toward the gunnery well. Behind the polarized turret plating, a corpulent body quivered in laughter while returning the salute.

He turned his attention to his new partner seated beside him. "Thanks for the tip, Sahr. We couldn't have set this one up without you."

The lithe figure, attired in white blouse and black pants, tousled her blonde hair behind the copilot's chair. She smiled pleasantly. "You offered a price I couldn't refuse." A flash in her eyes betrayed a second thought, but Larken missed it.

The dim circle on the sensor readout that was the *Kizbon's Box* moved placidly towards Darknon. It would only be out of the station's sensor range for another 10 minutes, but Larken enjoyed preying on the blissfully unaware for every possible moment. According to the pre-arranged battle plan, *Trust Me* emitted a quick binary pulse. *Kizbon's Box* was now at her best interception point.

"Harvest time!" Larken announced to the other ships as he

ignited his engines. Through the viewport, he watched the thrust flares bloom from the other two ships. As *Pillage* secured the escape sector, Larken relayed instructions to his conspirators. "Remember, our mark's got a stripped-down discontinued bucket with external cargo pods. Feel free to blaze away at the cockpit section, but leave the aft free for bounty."

The chase was on. Although *Pillage* was still 60 seconds from engaging, Larken found his pulse accelerating with the thrill of the hunt. Licking his lips, he surveyed Sahr, enjoying his triumph. "Did you love him?"

Sahr shrugged as the forward ships closed to weapons range, claws extended and ready to kill.

Then *Trust Me* blossomed into an explosion of brilliant proton fire.

Druug was screaming in panic over the comlink, "Bak! It's a ... Blast him, moron! The frammin' Crotok's got a ..."

This time Larken saw the brilliant green streams of light leap from their "helpless" target, followed by a shooting red star. Larken knew that the last volley was a proton torpedo. Druug never finished his sentence.

The Arakyd Helix deftly turned away from the *Profit's* burning hull, and charged full thrust towards the *Pillage*. Sahr gripped the fire control stick with a twisted face. The Helix's shields absorbed her volleys in perfect stride. Larken vectored *Pillage* away, hoping to clear the magnetic storm in time for a jump. But *Kizbon's Box* was already larger-than-life on the ship's sensor panels.

Their communications speaker crackled, "Nice to see you again, Larken. Sahr."

For the first and last time in his life, Larken knew what being on the other end of a laser barrel felt like.

A Servant of the Empire

Mace knew he was in trouble when the shooting started.

When the Imperial Customs cruiser had hailed his ship. Mace had tried desperately to stall for time. He'd used the old "communication malfunction"

routine, followed by the "how do I know you're not pirates?" ploy. He was Just going into the "reactor leak" number when the cruiser opened fire.

Either the first barrage was just a warning, or else the Imperial gunners were terrible shots. Mace threw the engine controls to maximum and switched off the safety interlocks. The Ordinary Trader leapt away from the cruiser like a frightened tauntaun.

Thump! The cabin shook as a laser blast struck the ship's flimsy shields. Two more shots followed. The shield status panel was all red.

Okay, so they're not bad shots, thought Mace. But how's their piloting?

He began jinking and veering the Ordinary Trader. Give them a minute to get used to it, and then-the hull groaned as Mace pulled the ship into a tight corkscrew turn, sending it hurtling down toward the system's largest gas giant.

* * *

On the bridge of the patrol cruiser Sentinel, Commander Panatic was deceptively relaxed. Normally a very upright, spit-and-polish officer, in combat he slumped immobile in his seat. Only his eyes remained alert, glued to the tracking display.

When the fugitive changed course. Panatic barely blinked. "Ensign Monidda, change to vector ten by two-ninety. Maintain speed."

"He's going into the planet's ring system!" Ensign Av, the astrogator, called out.

"Follow him."

As the view of the rings ahead changed from a shimmering silvery arch to a barrage of tumbling icebergs. Ensign Monidda began to earn his pay. The fugitive freighter looped and dodged among them, and the Sentinel hung grimly on its tail.

"All stop!" The helmsman shut down the engines with a sigh of relief.

"You're letting him get away, sir?" Av looked puzzled.

"Take us out. Vector zero by ninety." Panatic glanced over at the astrogator. "I'm not going to play his game. Once we're clear of the rings, switch to silent running. Engines off, sensors to passive mode. We'll let him find us."

* * *

"Ha!" Mace allowed himself a little chuckle when his scanner no longer showed the Imperial cruiser. "Serves them right for trying to follow a master pilot through an ice ring."

He slowed the Ordinary Trader to a safe speed, and scanned. No sign of the Imperial ship anywhere. Had they hit an ice chunk? He felt a momentary twinge of sympathy as he steered cautiously out of the rings and set a course for open space. He was just setting the hyperdrive when everything went wrong.

The cruiser was dead ahead, blazing away with all four lasers. Before Mace could react or adjust the shields, the Ordinary Trader was hit three times. Mace's control board lit up red, showing maneuvering thrusters out, shields gone, and the laser cannon disabled.

"Surrender or be destroyed!" the comm speaker blared.

"Okay, okay. You've got me."

* * *

Commander Panatic led the boarding party himself. Sergeant Ivlik and Private Kamlok kept the prisoner at gunpoint while Ensign Av and the other two troopers searched the ship. Panatic sat in the pilot's seat, asking questions.

"Name? Occupation?"

"My name's Rav Mace. I'm a freelance trader registered out of Duvull." That much was true. Of course, he had registration documents for half a dozen other systems, too.

"You're a long way from home, then. Cargo and destination?"

"I'm carrying medical supplies to the Moldar system."

"Your drive's set for the Shkali system."

Mace tried to keep his face blank. "Must've made a mistake setting it. You were shooting at me."

"Yes. Why did you try to run, by the way?"

"I thought you were pirates. My comm system's been acting up, like I told you." Mace glanced nervously at the two black-clad troopers flanking him.

Panatic swivelled his seat around to the comm panel, and flipped a switch. "Panatic here. Do you read me, Sentinel?"

"Sentinel here. Loud and clear, sir," said Lieutenant Sukal's voice from the speaker.

Panatic raised an eyebrow. Mace said nothing.

"Your ship has pretty good drives for a simple trading vessel."

"I like to tinker. Besides, speed is money."

Ensign Av returned. "I've checked the cargo hold. Four cases of medical supplies-no contraband."

Mace broke into a big smile. "See? I told you! This is all just a terrible misunderstanding. Now if you'll just let me be on my way..."

Panatic got to his feet. "Bring him."

Urged by Sergeant Ivlik's blaster, Mace followed the captain aft, to the cargo section. Panatic looked impassively at the crates. "Ensign! Did you look inside the cases?"

"Yes, sir. Clear down to the bottom."

"Mm." Panatic turned and glared at Mace. "Mm," he repeated.

Slowly, like a trackbeast on a scent, he went forward again, stopping to look into each compartment. Crew quarters, galley, passenger stateroom...

"Are your life pods in order?"

"Sure! I've got the latest inspection logged in the computer. I'll just call it up for you and then -"

"Check the life pods," Panatic ordered Sergeant Ivlik.

The Ordinary Trader carried two life pods. Ivlik opened the hatch on the starboard pod and looked in. "Looks all right, sir."

"See? Everything's perfectly all right, I'm sure you've got a busy schedule, so there's no point in wasting any more time here." Mace fell silent as Ivlik opened the second pod.

"Captain! There must be a hundred blasters packed in here." Ivlik squinted at the serial numbers on the wrapping. "Looks like Imperial Army issue."

"Look, I had no idea-" began Mace, but Panatic cut him off.

"Lock him in the brig." As Ivlik and Kamlok led Mace away, Panatic got out his comlink and called the bridge. "Lieutenant Sukal, I'm putting you in charge of the prisoner's ship. Tell Monidda to plot a course to Shkali system. We're going to find out what this smuggler was up to. "

* * *

The Sentinel entered the Shkali system ten hours later, on full battle alert. Lieutenant Sukal, followed close behind in the Ordinary Trader. But repeated scans showed no other ships in the system.

"Still nothing, sir," Ensign Monidda reported for the ninth time.

"All right. Cancel alert. Disarm weapons. Take us into orbit and do a sweep of the planet's surface."

He called up the astrogation database. Shkali, the main world of the system, was a cool, watery world with wide forests and some dry grassland. The natives were stone-age saurians with no planet-wide political system. Orbital scans had found no useful resources, and the system was far from any trade

routes. Panatic frowned at the screen. Why would anyone want to smuggle blasters to such a backwater? An adventurer might arm some natives and carve out an empire, but for what? The glory of lording it over a pack of scaly primitives?

There must be something else on Shkali. Something missing from the database. A Rebel outpost, perhaps? Panatic's pulse quickened at the thought.

Ensign Monidda interrupted his ruminations. "Sir! I'm picking up a comm signal. It's just the carrier wave, not a message."

"Pinpoint it and scan the area. Any ships down there?"

"No power sources, no energy discharge, no large metal masses. Just the one comm signal."

"What's the surface like there?"

"Low hills, with dense forest. Hmm-just west of the signal source is a large burned area."

"All right, take us down."

* * *

The Sentinel set down in the center of the burned area just after dawn. Panatic and the ship's troops fanned out in search of the source of the signal.

The fire had scorched a section of forest half a kilometer across. The ground underfoot still smoldered in places, and the air was hazy with smoke and ash. Soot and gray mud choked a small stream. Panatic's normally immaculate boots were soon filthy.

About a hundred meters from the ship they found the charred remains of a dozen crude huts. The wood walls and roofs were burned away completely, but the stone foundations and some clay pots had survived the blaze. A couple of Shkali bodies lay face down in the ash.

"Captain! I've found something!" Sergeant Ivlik called out.

Panatic hurried over to the edge of the burned area, where Ivlik was kneeling by a rock outcropping.

"Down here."

In a hollow formed by two large boulders a Shkali child huddled, staring out at the two humans with terrified eyes. It clutched a comlink with both hands.

"Come on out, there's a good little one. The fire's out now. It's all right. Come on. There, I've got you. What's this you're holding? May I see it?" Ivlik was a family man, and had little trouble coaxing the frightened little alien out of the crevice. He gently pried the comlink from its grasp and handed it to Panatic. The captain examined it while the sergeant stood by, nonchalantly jiggling the Shkali child and making baby talk.

The unit was an expensive commercial model, with a built-in recorder. Panatic pressed 'replay.'

A woman's voice, tense and breathless, almost drowned out by the sound of shouts and blaster fire in the background. "Mace, I hope you find this soon. The slavers are back-two ships this time. They're using speeder bikes and nets. Warn the other villages." A long pause, then some rustling sounds, then a man's shout, and finally a whispered, "go!" Then the message cut off.

The little Shkali wailed.

"Slavers."

"Lot of that going on nowadays. Captain. Even legal some places."

"That doesn't make it right."

"What about this little tyke?" The Shkali child was shivering in Ivlik's grip.

Panatic sighed. "It looks like there's another village a couple of kilometers north of here. Leave the child there. Take Kamlok and Lancer with you. The natives will probably be nervous about strangers right now. Set your blasters on stun; we don't want an incident."

* * *

The Sentinel's brig was designed to be cheerless. The walls and floor were gray metal, and a pair of cameras watched from the corner. Mace lay on one of the hard bunks and stared at the flickering glow panel in the ceiling. He was counting the flickers. When the door opened he was up to eight thousand.

The Imperial captain stepped in, followed by a guard. He took a comlink from his belt and pressed a button. "Mace, I hope you find this soon..."

Mace's elation turned to horror as the message played out.

"Did you find her?" he asked, knowing the answer already.

"I think you'd better tell me everything." said Panatic.

"It can't make things any worse. That's Nadria's comlink; she's my business partner. Knows a lot about primitive cultures, art, things like that. We've traded a fair bit with the Shkali in the past, but on our last visit they were all spooked. It took us a while to get the full story. Seems about a month ago some strangers showed up in a ship. They rounded a couple dozen Shkali up at gunpoint and took them away."

"Why didn't you report it to the authorities?"

Mace laughed derisively. "As if that would do any good. Half the slavers in this sector are on some Moff's payroll."

"You've been listening to too much Rebel propaganda."

Mace stared at the captain for a moment. "You Imperials are such kidders; for a second I thought you were serious. Anyway, we decided to do something about it. Nadria stayed here to try and organize the tribes, so they could help each other against raiders in the Suture. I went off to get some blasters so the Shkali would be able to shoot back."

"You got the blasters from the Rebel Alliance?"

"I...got them. Anyway, I was bringing them here when you stopped me."

"Do you know anything else about these slavers? Where they might be based?"

Mace looked genuinely puzzled for a moment. "You mean you're actually going after them?"

"They have broken the law. I checked-the Shkali haven't been declared a slave species yet."

"Well I'll be a one-legged nerf herder. Sure I know where to find them! The boss is Worruga Yab, a Rodian. He operates out of a place called Zahir. Know where that is?"

"Too well." Panatic turned to go, then paused. "Thank you, Mace. I'll be sure to mention how cooperative you've been in my report. It might mean a reduced sentence for you." The armored door hissed open and the Imperial officer strode out.

Mace resumed counting.

* * *

Panatic's cabin was as severe and tidy as his uniform. The only personal touch was a holo of the dreadnaught his grandfather had commanded in the Clone Wars. Everything else was strictly Navy issue.

He sat at his desk and called up the file on Zahir. He knew most of the information by heart, but it never hurt to review the facts. The place was the remnant of a failed development project. One tiny asteroid moon of an outer planet had been domed over and surrounded with a docking ring, to serve as the commercial hub for a new sector. But the nearby systems turned out to be worthless, the colonists and prospectors had never showed up, and eventually the promoters went bankrupt.

Years later the smuggler Worniga Yab had bought Zahir and turned it into a wide-open free port, a haven for smugglers, pirates and all manner of unsavory characters. Fanatic and other patrol captains had begged Sector Command for a Star Destroyer or two to shut Zahir down for good, but somehow their requests never got heard.

Fanatic found himself wishing the Sentinel was more than just a customs vessel. It would take at least a strike cruiser to capture the place in a straight fight.

Or... his eyes lit up as idea struck him. Maybe he did have the right ship for the job.

* * *

"Are you sure this is a good idea, sir? You're putting yourself at a terrible risk."

Panatic glared at Sukal. "Your opinion is noted, Lieutenant. You'll be in command while I'm gone. Run silent until you get my signal. Then I want you to come in last and hit that place with everything we've got. Target ships ducked on the ring, and the communications array. Do not engage any other ships in space - there's too many of them, and they could easily box the Sentinel in and destroy her. "

He turned to regard his traveling companions. Sergeant Ivlik looked remarkably uncomfortable in a cheap civilian suit. Mace wore the same scruffy-looking clothes he had been captured in. Panatic had to drape himself in a huge prospector's poncho to conceal his uniform. Thus attired, the three of them boarded the Ordinary Trader and parted company with the Sentinel in the dim outskirts of the system.

Panatic seated himself in the copilot's chair and sat for a moment watching the stars before speaking. "I want to make a deal with you, Mace."

"Music to my ears, Captain."

"At Zahir we'll be in your element, not mine. You know the smugglers and prospectors who do business there. I'm sure it would be tempting for you to reveal my identity and escape."

"I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought of that."

"But I can get those slaves released.. You can't. And I think you want your partner back. So here's my offer: if you cooperate with me, I'll see to it that she goes free. Your arrest is already logged, so I can't let you go, but I won't charge her."

"Mighty generous of you."

"I should add that I haven't contacted Systems Command to see if either of you are wanted for treasonous activities. As far as I'm concerned, you're an ordinary smuggler. Now will you give me your word that you'll help me?"

Mace regarded Panatic silently for a moment. "You've got a deal."

"Good. Sergeant, I think you can put away your weapon now."

* * *

The ringed rock of Zahir grew large in the cockpit window as Mace brought the ship in. There were a dozen vessels docked at the ring or floating nearby. Most were scout ships or small freighters like the Ordinary Trader, but there were a few that stood out. Panatic eyed a bulky Corellian corvette nervously. In a stand-up fight the bigger ship could Sentinel to scrap.

A fancy yacht with gold-alloy plating on the hull was clamped to the docking ring. It looked familiar, but Panatic couldn't place it and Mace's computer was no help at all. Probably stolen, he decided.

The traffic controller sounded as if he was overdue for a lung bath. "Welcome to Zahir, crossroads of the sector. All docking fees must be paid In advance. You can dock at Lock 23."

Beyond the airlock. Zahir was a dingy place. The broad corridor of the docking ring was full of dust and litter, and half the glow panels were dark. The walls were marked with graffiti and blaster burns. Twice they had to step over people sprawled on the floor, either drunk or dead.

At the entrance to one of the three tubes linking the docking ring to the central asteroid, they met what passed for customs on Zahir. A wrinkled old Twi'lek with a missing tentacle stopped them at the door while a couple of Gamorrean thugs stood by with blasters.

"Docking fee. Twenty credits."

Mace paid him. Panatic tried to look bored and tough under the gaze of the Gamorreans. One of them snorted and turned away.

They rode the slideway down one of the tubes linking the docking ring to the main body of Zahir. The center of the complex was a huge domed, which time and neglect were turning into a tangled jungle. A cleared area held an open-air bazaar, where vendors at a dozen crude stalls sold everything from glow-wine to protocol droids.

"Wait here and try to blend in," said Mace. "I see a familiar face." He spent a few minutes chatting with a fat little Sullustan selling tanks of Tibanna gas. Panatic and Ivlik stood stiffly in the middle of the throng, looking warily about them. Mace waved goodbye to his Sullustan friend and threaded his way through the crowd to them.

"Yab's here, all right. He's got a whole load of new slaves down in the holding pens. There's going to be an auction this afternoon."

"Perfect. We can find out who his customers are."

"Until then we'd better lie low. You two stick out like a couple of rancors at a garden party. There's a bar near here with a pretty good band."

Panatic let Mace lead the three of them to the saloon. It was a bit rougher than the officers' clubs he normally frequented. But the music was good, and Sergeant Ivlik was big enough to make the corner booth with a view of the door and waited.

"And I replaced the hyperdrive flux coil with a pair of synchluned B-105 units, which improves the jump response time by-" Mace was droning on about his ship, and Panatic was only half paying attention. Suddenly, Mace stopped short, staring at the door. Panatic followed his gaze.

A small, thin man in the garb of an Imperial administrator had just entered the bar, followed by a pair of storm troopers.

"Uh-oh." Mace whispered. "Maybe if we slip out one at a time they won't spot us."

"Don't worry. Mace," said Panatic, smiling. "You're already in the hands of the Empire, remember?"

Inwardly, Panatic wasn't so sanguine. The presence of an Imperial official here on Zahir was a puzzle. How had he come here? And why? And why did nobody seem to care? For a gang of thieves and smugglers, the denizens of Zahir seemed remarkably calm about two Imperial stormtroopers in their midst.

"I still don't like this. Captain," Mace hissed. "He's watching us."

"Calm down. That's just your imagination."

The Imperial official summoned the bartender to his table and ordered quietly. His two guards remained standing on either side of him, scanning the bar for trouble.

"I'll be in the 'fresher," said Mace, getting to his feet.

"Stay with him," Panatic ordered Ivlik. The sergeant hurried after Mace.

Panatic sighed in annoyance. This was no time for Mace to start getting nervous. But what could one expect from a criminal? He sipped his drink and looked at his chrono again. Still an hour before the auction.

A heavy finger tapped him on shoulder. Panatic turned to see three Gamorreans standing behind him with drawn blasters. Before he could move, they shot him.

* * *

He woke up in an agony of pins and needles as the blaster stun wore off. A boot in the ribs helped him regain consciousness. Panatic found himself lying on the floor of an office; a clear domed ceiling gave a splendid view of the starry sky.

Two men were standing over him. One was the Imperial official he'd seen in the cantina. The other was a Rodian in a flashy suit drawing back a chrome-plated boot for another kick.

"No need for that, Yab," said the official. "I think he's waking up." He smiled down at Panatic. "I do apologize for my colleague here. He's a bit unsubtle. My name's Varden Quil. And you, I believe, are Commander Ulan Panatic of the Imperial Navy."

Panatic struggled to his feet and straightened his uniform. The smelly poncho was gone, as were his blaster and comlink. "That's correct. This man is a slaver and a murderer, and I am here to arrest him."

The official sighed. "Oh, dear. Evidently you haven't been informed-Yab is a friend of Moff Tricus Phenge."

"The governor of Deratus sector?"

"The same. My employer, in fact. The Moff and Yab here have an arrangement. In exchange for protection from bothersome people like you, Yab provides laborers to work the goldberry fields on the Moff's estates, and the occasional specialty item. A perfect partnership."

"Raiding native settlements for slaves is illegal."

Quil laughed. "Oh, dear me. Really, Commander, you should be in a museum somewhere. Surely the Imperial Navy has better things to do than worry about the welfare of a few primitives? Besides, an intelligent officer such as yourself should know that the wishes of a Moff are more important than the letter of the law."

"Too much talk," hissed Yab. "What are we going to do with him?"

"A good question. Commander. I'd like your input on this. Should we kill you or let you go?"

"What?"

"You could cause my employer a great deal of inconvenience if you insist on arresting Yab. We can't have that. So unless you agree to drop this whole business and go back to chasing Rebels, I'm afraid we're going to have to kill you. Which will it be. Commander?"

Panatic swallowed hard, then forced his face into a smile. "I'm willing to forget about the whole thing if you are."

Quil stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Goodness, Commander. I don't think I've ever seen worse acting! It's good to know your death won't rob the galaxy of a great talent."

Panatic leapt forward to grapple with Yab, trying to grab the Rodlan's blaster. He had the advantage of surprise, but the slaver was an experienced brawler. The two of them slammed into the desk, rebounded, and crashed into a drink synthesizer. Quil darted for the door.

Panatic snatched up a footstool and smashed it over Yab's head. The Rodian staggered back for a moment, long enough for Panatic to get the blaster from his grip.

"All right, hands up, both of you!" He backed away from Quil and Yab, covering them with the blaster. The two raised their hands slowly.

"Now don't do anything hasty, Commander," said Quil. "We can still salvage the situation. You're obviously an ambitious fellow-I'm sure I could arrange a promotion for you. Maybe a Star Destroyer instead of a patrol cruiser?"

"Shut up." Panatic moved over to the desk. "Where's my comlink?"

"In the drawer," said Yab. "The top one."

When Panatic looked down to open the drawer, Quil bolted for the door. It hissed open, revealing the two stormtroopers on guard outside. "Get him!" the little official yelled.

Panatic got off one wild shot, which glanced off one trooper's armor. Then they were on him, using their rifle butts to club him into submission.

"What shall we do with him now?" asked Quil thoughtfully.

"Now he dies," said Yab, giving Panatic another kick in the ribs. "Put him in the furnace."

"How tidy," said Quil approvingly.

* * *

The stormtroopers dragged Panatic from the office. "Let me go! I order you to let me go! Quil is only a civilian; he has no authority. I am an officer of the Imperial Navy! What you're doing is a court-martial offense! Can you hear me in there? A court-martial offense!" The troopers marched on in silence.

Yab's quarters occupied what had been built as a luxury hotel. His office was on top, and the rooms were used to house the slaver's henchmen and bully-boys. The lower levels were kitchens, freezers, and services. For waste disposal the hotel had been equipped with a large plasma furnace. The stormtroopers Panatic into the furnace and slammed the heavy door.

The furnace was a gleaming steel cylinder, dimly lit by the glow of safety lights behind thick glass. The loading hatch was at one end, and the other end was the open maw of the fusion torch. The interior was filled with bits of scrap, piles of food waste and assorted junk too worthless to keep. All of it, Panatic included, would be reduced to a cloud ionized plasma when the fusion torch switched on.

Panatic didn't waste time shouting or pounding on the door. He had a few seconds while the troopers unlocked the controls and started the warm-up cycle. What to do? The furnace was too solid to break out of, and there was nothing that could protect him the heat of the fusion torch.

But scrap metal and garbage doesn't fight back. He snatched up a bent metal rod and scrambled over the junk to the mouth of the torch. Deep inside it he could hear the whine of fuel pumps and the hum of containment coils powering up. Panatic jammed his make-shift tool deep into the torch, and was rewarded with a powerful shock that threw him into a pile of scrap and left his fingers numb. Blue light flared around the metal rod as it shorted out the containment coils. The sound of pumps faded as the fusion torch shut down.

Hampered by his useless arm, Panatic climbed back over the junk to the door, and grabbed the heaviest thing he could find-a big chunk of thick pipe. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it would have to do.

The door opened, and the dim light outside was dazzling. Panatic swung his pipe club clumsily at his attackers, catching one a solid blow on the side of the head. But the second dodged aside and grabbed Panatic's arms.

"Sir! It's us!" It was Sergeant Ivlik. The one he'd clubbed was Mace.

"Ow. Remind me never to go up against any Imperials armed with scrap metal! Are you all right. Captain?"

"Yes. Just a little sore. Where are the stormtroopers?"

"Stunned, for the moment," said Ivlik.

"Good. We can stow them in this furnace; they'll be safe there. How did you find me?"

"I got chummy with one of Yab's goons and asked him where the boss puts people he doesn't like. To be honest, we were afraid of finding nothing but some greasy soot."

"I was lucky."

"Well, let's hope your luck holds long enough for us to get off this miserable rock before they notice you haven't been fried."

"Leave? We're not going anywhere. What time is it? Has the auction started?"

Mace glanced at his chrono. "It started about half an hour ago. You're not serious about this, are you? This place is crawling with armed creeps, goons, slavers and pirates."

Panatic finished straightening his uniform, flexed the fingers of his right hand and adjusted his cap. "In the fleet we have a saying, Mace: 'Defeat is not in the manual. 'Worruga Yab thinks he can defy the Imperial Navy. I'm going to teach him otherwise."

"Now I understand why the Academy turned me down. I wasn't crazy enough."

"You're forgetting your friend Nadria. This is probably the last chance to rescue her."

Mace became suddenly serious. "All right, I'm in, I still think this is crazy, but I'm in."

"Good. Now, since the enemy currently outnumbers us, we must rely on strategy and make the best use of what assets we have."

* * *

The slaves were penned in six cavernous storage chambers carved from the bare rock of Zahir. To allow buyers to inspect the merchandise, there were catwalks raised four meters above the floor, from which guards and customers could look down on the helpless captives below. One of Yab's thugs patrolled each chamber, armed with a blaster and an electrolash.

Mace strolled along the catwalk, trying to look like a prospective buyer. The slaves stared up at him miserably as he passed. He could recognize a dozen species, and there were a dozen more he'd never seen before.

In the fifth chamber he spotted a familiar face. Nadria was standing with a group of Shkali, glaring at the guard. She looked tired and dirty, but unharmed. He coughed. She looked up at him, started to smile, then controlled her reaction. Mace risked a wink at her.

Keeping his expression neutral, he sauntered over to the guard, a tall, bony fellow with an impressive collection of scars. Mace waited until there were no other customers in the chamber, then spoke. "Are these slaves healthy?"

"Yep. Boss don't keep sick ones."

"A sensible precaution. The reason I ask is that one of these doesn't look too well."

"Which one?" The guard uncoiled his electrolash.

"The one in the green tunic over there."

"Green tunic?"

"There in the back, see? Kind of crouching down by the wall." Mace pointed at a random spot. "Right next to the Mon Calamari."

"I don't see any green-" Mace grabbed the seat of the guard's pants and tipped him over the railing into the pit of slaves below.

In an instant Nadria and some of the others muffled the guard's shouts and snatched away his weapons.

"Mace!" she cried happily. "I knew you'd come for me! Did you get help from the Alliance?"

"Not exactly. I'll explain later. Let's get you and these others out of this pit. Time's short."

* * *

The auction was being held underneath the main dome. A crowd of perhaps a hundred buyers stood around a platform, where Yab himself auctioned off the slaves.

A Twi'lek woman stood on the block, eyes downcast, while Yab made his pitch to the buyers.

"Pretty girl. Young and healthy. Perfect as a household servant. Very docile." He snickered loudly, echoed by some of the crowd.

"Do I hear live hundred? Yes. Five fifty? Six hundred? Six fifty? No? Six twenty-five? Hah. Six thirty? Do I hear six thirty? Six thirty-live? The gentleman bids six thirty-live. Six forty? Do I hear six forty?"

Suddenly, a blaster shot exploded overhead. The crowd fell silent as Panatic strode forward, accompanied by Ivlik in stormtrooper armor. "I am Commander Ulan Panatic of the Imperial Navy. Everyone here is under arrest!"

That was Mace's cue to come running in from one of the side entrances, yelling wildly. "Imperials! Imperial soldiers everywhere! Run for it!"

Most of the people in the room were criminals of one variety or another. They reacted instinctively by fleeing. In an instant the auction dissolved into a wild melee as buyers fought to get away.

"You!" Yab shrieked at Panatic. -Why aren't you dead?'

"You are under arrest, Worruga Yab. Surrender or we'll shoot!"

Yab's answer was to draw his own blaster and open fire. Panatic snapped off one shot, then dropped and rolled to avoid Yab's fire. Ivlik dodged clumsily in the armor, blazing away with his rifle.

"Don't just stand there-after him!" Yab shouted to his guards. Four of them advanced toward Panatic's hiding place, fanning out to surround him. The other two tried to pin down Ivlik with a barrage of blaster bolts.

"This is your last chance, Yab!"

"Kill him! I want his head on-Eyaah!" he shrieked as an electrolash struck him in the back. Nadria stung his arm again with the lash, and kicked his fallen blaster out of reach.

The freed slaves were pouring into the dome from the entrances, converging on Yab with murder in their eyes. The thugs turned and began firing into the throng.

"Give up and won't be harmed!" Panatic shouted at them. As it to back up his words, the Sentinel streaked past the dome, firing at the ships around Zahir. Ships were fleeing in all directions.

The guards, stunned, raised their hands.

* * *

"Have you finished processing the prisoners, Ensign Av?" Panatic asked, entering the Sentinel's bridge. Four hours of sleep and a hot meal had restored him completely, and he had changed into a freshly-pressed uniform.

"Yes, sir. The ringleaders are already aboard, locked up in the brig. We found Worruga Yab-dead. Apparently a group of slaves wanted revenge."

"A pity he won't stand trial."

"Yes, sir. That still leaves two problems. First, what are we going to do with all these slaves? There must be a hundred of them. We can't fit that many aboard the Sentinel."

"How many ships were captured in our raid?"

"Eight. Three are spaceworthy."

"All right, then. You, Monidda, and Sukal will use those ships to ferry the slaves back to wherever they were captured. And contact Captain Innis of the Protector, see if he can lend us a hand."

"Yes, sir. The second thing is the prisoner Varden Quil. He keeps demanding to see you."

Panatic sighed. "I suppose I can't put that off any longer. Have Sergeant Ivlik bring him up here."

A few minutes later, Sergeant Ivlik and trooper Lanzer arrived on the bridge, flanking a furious Verden Quil.

"Captain, this is an outrage! I demand that you release me at once!"

"Not until you stand trial. I've got a long list of charges for you, Quil-conspiracy, assault on an Imperial officer, resisting arrest, attempted murder, trafficking in illegal slaves, and I'm sure an investigation could uncover more. You could wind up on Kessel, or worse."

"May I remind you that I am the personal assistant to Moff Tricus Phenge? He has powerful friends. If you offend the Moff, you can forget about a career in the Navy."

"We seem to be at a standoff. If I press charges, the Moff may destroy my career. But if I let you go, you're quite capable of making trouble for me on your own."

Quil sneered. "If you apologize, I may forgive you, Captain."

Panatic smiled back. "As an Imperial officer, I have the option of pressing charges against you in an Imperial court, or of handing you over to planetary authorities. I've decided to take the second option."

"Planetary authorities? What planetary authorities?"

"I am going to hand you over to the Tribal Council on Shkali for trial. They have stiff penalties for slave raiding there. Good luck."

"Wait! Surely we can work something out! I have friends!"

"Take the prisoner back to the brig. Sergeant."

As Ivlik and Lanzer dragged Quil away, his shouts grew louder and more frantic. "I have money! Fifty thousand credits! A hundred thousand! Cash!"

Panatic did not permit himself to smile. He turned to Ensign Av. "Anything else to attend to?"

"There is the matter of the prisoner Rav Mace. He's still missing."

Panatic's face remained expressionless, and he paused for a split-second before replying. "Don't bother searching for him. He tried to make a run for it and I had to shoot him. Someone must have stolen his ship in the confusion. The details will be in my report."

Av looked at his commanding officer curiously for a moment, then nodded. "That takes care of everything, sir."

"Good. You may begin transporting the slaves at your convenience, Ensign. I've got some messages to send."

* * *

Three months later, Mace and Nadria were getting the Ordinary Trader restocked at Moldar when an Ithorian scout dropped off a message chip addressed to them.

When he put it into the reader, Panatic's face appeared on the screen. "I didn't get a chance to thank you properly, Mace. You saved my life at least once and I am grateful. But now the score is settled. I better not catch you in my sector again."

Mace smiled and shook his head. "May the Force be with you, Captain."

Breaking Free

"Sir?"

Linkaas turned, gazing at his subordinate with thoughtful eyes. The sun of Evas VI had finally come out after three days of rain, and he wanted to enjoy its soothing warmth. Sunlamps only did so much.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked, leaning forward. "And it had better be good."

The subordinate seemed to shrink inside his clothing. "Sir, you wanted to know when Lifehold got his assignment?"

"And has he?"

"Yes, sir, just a few moments ago."

Linkaas turned back towards the window. "Excellent. He'll have to stop at Darkon III first before going to Dohu. Send Chokk and Bakk to Dohu immediately. I want them in place when Lifehold gets there."

The subordinate looked relieved. "They've already left, sir. Chokk says they'll beat Lifehold to Dohu by at least a day."

"Good," Linkaas said, drinking in the warmth. The rain had been good for his fronds, but without the sunlight he would freeze. "That should give them plenty of time to be in place to kill Lifehold." He spun suddenly, startling the subordinate. "Was there anything else?"

"N-no, sir," the subordinate mumbled.

"Very well, then. I think that I shall take my sun on the terrace. Wheel me out, Qwot."

"Yes, sir."

* * *

The pinging of the proximity alarm woke Dannen from a reasonably sound sleep. With a yawn and a stretch, he hopped down from his berth and headed for the bridge of the Lifeline. Out of habit, he cocked his ears, listening for any change in pitch that would indicate engine problems. Satisfied that his ship would make it back to Evas, he paused at an empty cabin. He almost knocked before he caught himself. Feq had been dead for a couple of months now, but Dannen still found himself listening for Feq's jovial voice, his friendly chuckle, and his curses as he'd tried to keep the engines running.

Face it, Lifehold, Dannen told himself, he's gone. At least you won't have to listen to his snoring.

Turning, Dannen walked to the bridge and sat down just as the hyperdrive shut off and the main engine kicked in. Checking his readouts, he confirmed that he was indeed just outside the Dohu system, about 20,000 kilometers from the outermost planet's orbit. He hated coming out this far from the system, but without a backup pilot, he didn't have much choice. He had to sleep sometime, after all. But, with eight planets in the system and his destination the seventh, he only had a short flight to deal with.

He glanced over at the empty copilot's chair. Well, at least this was the last job he owed on his debt. One more pickup/delivery, one more payment to Linkaas, and the Lifeline would be his at last -- lock, stock, and sensor dish. Then he could afford to hire a first mate, and go for the profits.

Two hours later, as he guided his ship towards the largest land mass on Dohu VII, his ship comm began blaring insistently. "Unidentified ship, this is Dohu Space Control, respond immediately. Unidentified ship, this is Dohu Space Control."

Dannen hit the response button, cutting the voice off in mid-syllable. "Dohu Space Control, go ahead."

"Unidentified ship, please broadcast your identity beacon, and state your purpose."

"Transmitting code now, Space Control," Dannen said, flicking a switch.

A moment later, the comm crackled to life again. "Space Control to starship Black Knight, state your purpose."

"Equipment delivery to warehouse of Linkaas Corporation in city of Skagras," he replied. A small lie; actually, it was a pickup.

"Starship Black Knight, you are cleared to land at Docking Bay 71 in the city of Skagras. Directions are being transmitted to your guidance computer."

"Space Control, this is the Black Knight, cleared for Docking Bay 71," Dannen said. "Directions received. Thanks for the assistance. Black Knight out."

* * *

Skagras was a fairly good-sized city, but Docking Bay 71 was little more than a pit in the ground with a few support buildings nearby. As Dannen hovered over the pit, the ship lurched to starboard, and a red light began flashing. With a curse, Dannen struggled to keep the ship level as the landing gear lowered. He heard a thunk as the gear locked into place.

Here we go, all or nothing, he thought. Just hope it isn't too serious.

Slowly he eased the ship to the ground, fighting the loss of power all the way. The starboard landing gear hit the ground, and Dannen reduced power to the port side repulsorlift. The port gear touched down with a thud, and all the legs creaked as they bore the full weight of the ship. With a sigh of relief, Dannen shut down the engines and headed for the engine room.

Checking only told him what he had expected -- the starboard repulsorlift had blown out. It was still barely operational, but it meant he had two choices: fix it today with money he didn't have yet or lift off with 40 percent less power. Looked like the second option was all he had.

"Great," Dannen said to himself. "That's all I need today."

Heading out of the ship, he stopped just long enough to grab a datapad with his directions to the warehouse. Consulting it, he saw that it was about four kilometers away, in the heart of the city. Taking the first street he came to, he noticed a cantina on the corner.

A grin crossed his face. He had enough time for a little refreshment.

Dannen's nose wrinkled as he entered the cantina. An aroma of smoke, sweat, and incense fumes assaulted his nasal passages. Walking to the bar, he noticed a few patrons in one of the booths gazing his way. They scrutinized him intently as he placed his order with the bartender. After a short conversation, one of them approached him.

It was a Silika, his craggy face looking weather-beaten and worn. Like all of its race, it had a slit of a mouth across its face; but this one also had a curious look in its eyes.

It tapped Dannen's shoulder with the leftmost of its three arms. "You are Dannen Lifehold?"

Dannen looked at the questioner. "Who wants to know?"

The alien looked confused. "I do. Is there anyone else with me?"

Dannen sighed. "Never mind. What do you want?"

"I want to meet the being who beat Kemmel Attapi at his own game. He was rumored to have hair your shade."

Dannen ran a hand through his thick shock of blue. Then he remembered. "Oh, yes, now I remember. The Silika with a hollow body."

"Yes," the alien confirmed. "I am Kenta Anwa. Until you beat him, I lasted the longest against him." His eyes glittered. "Now, I challenge you to the Contest."

"Look, I really don't want to do this, friend. I've had a bad day and it promises to be worse. And I really don't think you want me to take your money."

"Honor demands that I challenge you, Lifehold-sir. And you know of our honor, don't you?"

Dannen did. The Contest demanded that the loser accept defeat and not take revenge on the winner. Credits were usually exchanged by the witnesses, but bets between the contestants were not unknown. He sighed inwardly. "All right, all right, your challenge is accepted."

The Silika smiled gratingly. "Come join us, and I will get our fluids." He signalled the bartender. "Silika waters, if you please." As the bartender complied, Dannen joined the other Silika at the table. The others faced him and performed an intricate series of gestures with all three hands as he sat down. Dannen repeated the gestures as best as he could.

"Greetings, Lifehold-sir, defeater of Kemmel Attapi," they chorused. "We welcome you, and wish you strength."

Dannen sighed. He hated standing on ceremony, but it had to be done. Challenge had been offered and properly accepted, so he had to go through with it. Besides, if he backed out now, they would shoot him.

"I thank you for your greetings, and return them in full," he responded.

At the reply, the three relaxed visibly and stretched out their middle hands to him for shaking. Dannen clasped each one, then surreptitiously wiped the gravel and dust from his hands. When his challenger returned with several frosted glasses, Dannen repeated the gestures and the words.

The challenger tossed a thousand-credit chip onto the table -- his wager. Dannen blinked at the chip; if he had known, he would have been a little more adamant. He really didn't want to do this, but it was too late now.

Well, at least he could get his ship fixed.

"Are you ready, Lifehold-sir?"

"Yes," Dannen answered, eager to get it over with.

"Then begin, and I will follow."

Dannen took an experimental sip and tasted it thoroughly. No odd aftertaste, no trace of anything unusual, no unnatural smell ... probably safe. Throat working, he drained the glass in one long gulp and set the glass down. The

challenger gaped, then looked at his glass. Slowly, he raised it, and, as the Contest rules stated, drank his the same way.

Five mugs later, the challenger wobbled for a moment, mumbled something, then fell onto the floor with a loud crash. The three remaining Silika gazed at Dannen with awe as he picked up the chip.

"You are truly a champion, Lifehold-sir," the middle one said. "No wonder you beat Attapi."

Dannen bowed. "My congratulations to your friend. He is a brave being, if a little rash." With a small salute, he turned and left.

As he hit the fresh air and the path towards the warehouse, Dannen thought about this reputation he was getting. If he hadn't gotten into the contest with Attapi, someone else would have, of course. Almost any being would have done the job -- he just happened to be the one selected. There just weren't too many creatures who were affected by mineral water, and with their silicon-based physiology, Silika were influenced by it that much more quickly. Why they had to challenge a human in the first place made no sense, but maybe it was just bad luck. It was like challenging a Wookiee to a tree-climbing contest.

A couple of kilometers later, Dannen arrived at the warehouse. He had gotten used to the bizarre way Linkaas handled things; warehouses without workers were the norm. Dohu was just a stopping point for the cargo, and Dannen was just the next one to transport it.

"Boy, I'm glad this is the last one," he muttered to himself. "I hate the way that plant does business."

Keying his entry code into the lock, he stepped inside, making his way to the storage area. Rounding a corner, he found the cargo: 12 crates, each about six cubic meters in size. A rack of cargo movers stood against the wall. Knowing Linkaas, they would be charged and ready.

Dannen headed towards the movers. As he rounded the corner, something tickled the back of his neck. Instinctively he rolled forward, just in time to avoid the blaster shot that scorched the floor where he'd been standing. Dannen ducked behind the crates and drew his own blaster from its holster. Quickly he fired off two shots, then ducked behind cover.

Great, this is all I need.

Suddenly, something lashed out from behind and wrapped itself tightly around his body, pinning his arms. Seconds later, there was a small sting at his throat, and he was raised off the ground and gagged with a similar-feeling cord. He found himself looking at two red-skinned, muscular bodies. Something familiar about them...

He was still thinking about it when the darkness took him.

* * *

When he came to, he was suspended in midair. By twisting his body slightly, he found that he was hanging from a rafter in the roof. More cords had bound his wrists, and the rope on his body was tied to the beam above him. He had been blindfolded, but he could hear the thieves below as they moved the crates out of the warehouse and into some kind of vehicle. Slowly, so as not to arouse attention, he twisted his wrists to try to loosen his bonds. No use -- it was almost like his hands were dipped in plasteel.

The sense of déjà vu returned, stronger this time. Plasteel... something about bonds that felt like plasteel...

His musings were cut short when he heard a voice below him. "What do we do with him?"

"You remember what the boss said," a second voice replied. "We kill him, and leave him here."

I've heard those voices before, but where? he thought.

"What about his ship?" First Voice said.

"We leave it for now, and get it later."

"Okay," First Voice said.

Dannen heard the rustle of a blaster being drawn, and braced himself. I'm on my way, Feq. Sooner than I thought, but I'm coming.

When the shot came, there was a scream from below, and several war whoops from the direction of the door. Next came a lot of shooting, and a lot of shouting.

"Let's get out of here!" Second Voice said. "There's too many of them!"

Dannen heard the sound of the cargo carrier drive away. Then, a few moments later, he felt hands lowering him gently to the floor. A vibro-shiv cut his bonds, and his blindfold was removed. Blinking at bright light, Dannen beheld...

"Kenta Anwa?"

The Silika shook his head. "No, Lifehold-sir, I am Klin, brother and companion to Kenta. Are you injured?"

Dannen stood, wincing at the pain in his muscles. "Sore, but I'll live." He looked from one Silika to the other. "How did you find me?"

"My brother's ego got the best of him," Klin said. "He wanted to prove that he had met and competed against you, but forgot to bring his holo-camera. When he woke up, he demanded that I get his camera and find you. We tracked your scent here, and came upon the bandits." His rocky face looked forlorn. "We could not stop them from getting away."

"But you did stop them from killing me," Dannen said as he stretched. "Thank you. I owe you one."

Klin shook his head, "You owe us nothing, Lifehold-sir. We are glad to assist. But, we would ask one favor."

"Name it."

Klin reached into his pack and pulled out a holo-camera.

* * *

Dannen headed towards the docking bay. He'd been walking and thinking for the last hour, trying to figure out what to do. His cargo had been stolen, he wasn't going to be able to make his last ship payment, and his starboard

repulsorlift was almost shot. And, to top it all off, those bandits had even taken his winnings from the Contest.

As he entered his bay, his despair grew. So, what to do?

Go tell Linkaas the truth? Sure, as if he'd believe it. And Linkaas wouldn't consider the testimony of the Silika.

Run? Yeah, but to where? And he'd spend the rest of his life with Linkaas' stooges after him. Definitely not the way to a long life.

Dannen stopped cold in the middle of the bay. Stooges... wait a minute...

"That's it!" he shouted. "That lousy, rotten, son-of-a..."

His shout startled something under his ship. In an instant, his blaster was in his hand and pointing at the intruder.

"Come on out!" he called. "I'm not in the mood for games!"

The interloper slowly came out from under the ship. She stood about one and a half meters high, with light brown fur and blue eyes. Her face and body were very catlike in nature, right down to the whiskers. She wore a threadbare shirt and torn pants. A tool belt hung from her waist. Barefoot, her tail twitched, although Dannen couldn't tell if it was from fear, anger, or apprehension.

Dannen approached her slowly. "What were you doing under there?"

She gazed at him with wide eyes. "Ship broken. I make better."

"You're a mechanic?"

"Mechanic?" she asked, her tongue stumbling over what was obviously an unfamiliar word.

Dannen tried again. "You fix things?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes! I fix your ship!"

Dannen lowered his blaster. "Who told you my ship needed repairs?"

"I saw ship land. Knew it was broken. Came to fix."

"Wait a minute, you just walked in here and started working?"

"No, jumped wall," she said, pointing at the wall. "Ship is yours?"

"Yes, it is."

She smiled, revealing incisors like needles. "Very pretty."

The Lifeline? Pretty? That's a new one. Dannen returned the smile. "What's your name?"

She said something too fast and too complicated for him to follow. "Person I once travel with called me Purr. I liked that."

"All right, Purr it is. Would you show me what you fixed?"

She led him underneath the ship to the starboard repulsorlift. Removing a panel, she moved aside so he could look. Dannen looked, and gasped: parts and wires he'd never seen before were hooked together in a mess that looked like undercooked Dacho noodles.

"Oh, no! What have you done?" he moaned in despair.

"Fixed it," Purr said.

"You've got to be kidding. It'll never work like this!"

"Yes, it work now. Try it!"

Her confidence was real, but the way it looked... "Are you sure?"

"It work now. Promise!"

Dannen took another look, then sighed. "Okay, but if this ship crashes and I get killed, I'll never speak to you again."

"No!" Purr shouted, wrapping her arms around him. "No! Don't crash! Don't crash!"

"Easy, Purr," Dannen said, surprised. "It was just a joke."

Purr buried her face into his chest. "Never joke about death. Never!"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I'll never do it again, promise."

She looked up at him. "Promise?"

"I promise. Now, let me go, and I'll try your repair."

She looked up at his face. "Repair?"

"Never mind."

Purr released him, and together they headed to the bridge. Dannen sat down, and Purr slipped into the copilot's chair. After receiving clearance to take off, Dannen slowly fed power to the repulsorlifts, checking the warning light every few seconds.

The Lifeline slowly raised off the ground. The starboard repulsorlift was carrying its share of the load with no sign of power loss. Dannen went to full power, and the Lifeline rose majestically toward the sky.

"I don't believe it," he said in awe.

"Told you it was fixed," Purr said with a smile.

"You sure did. I'll be a bantha, it works." Then he remembered "Purr, I can't pay you. See, I was robbed, and..."

Purr raised a paw and silenced him. "Don't want money. But... something to eat? And a warm place to sleep?"

Dannen smiled, and led her to the kitchen. She operated the autochef with practiced ease, he noticed. After leading her to a spare room, he put the ship into hyperspace, then went to his own room.

He had a lot of thinking to do.

* * *

At about three planetary diameters away from Evas, Dannen put a call through to Linkaas on the subspace comm. Linkaas came on immediately.

"Dannen, my boy, it's good to hear from you," he said, surprise evident in his voice.

"Spare me, Linkaas," Dannen interrupted. "You weren't planning on seeing me ever again, and you know it."

"Whatever do you mean, my boy?"

"You had your boys Chokk and Bakk waiting for me at Skagras, Linkaas. They ambushed me and almost killed me. I saw them."

Linkaas did his best to sound hurt. He didn't do well. "Even if they were there, how can you say I sent them to kill you? You're one of my best couriers."

Dannen smiled grimly into the vid pickup. "Because they were stupid enough to use rope guns, that's why. They're still in development. I tested them myself, and I know what the cord feels like. That's how I know, you sap-blooded Pliith weed. You tried to have me killed, and make it look like a robbery."

For a moment, Linkaas' fronds turned purple with rage. "Those incompetent, bungling... why, Dannen, I don't know what you're talking about. Those rope guns must have been stolen."

"No dice, Linkas. I figured it all out, you see. I think you wanted to steal the Lifeline. I'd almost paid it off, meaning I wouldn't have to work for you anymore. So you have me killed, then sell the ship to some other poor fool." Dannen smiled grimly. "Plus, you'd have the shipment to sell, without paying for its transport. Cute scheme. You get an A for effort. But it wasn't good enough."

Linkaas answered Dannen's smile with one of his own. "You can't prove any of it, you know. It would just be the word of a smuggler against the word of a corporation president. You wouldn't stand a chance."

Dannen's grin tightened. "Try me."

"I just might. Anyway, you still owe me for your last payment, plus the cost of the shipment you lost..."

"You stole it!" Dannen thundered.

"Prove it. As I was saying, you now owe me 25,334 credits, payable on demand. And I demand it now."

Dannen sat back, stunned. "I hope someone poisons your fertilizer."

Just at that moment, Purr peered into the comm screen. "He's a plant!" she exclaimed in amazement.

"Purr, get back!" Dannen said, pushing her away.

"Why, Dannen, who's your friend?" Linkaas asked, his anger momentarily forgotten.

"Ah, nobody," Dannen said.

"Nonsense, my boy; let me see her."

Purr leaned into the pickup again. Linkaas examined her image closely, then chuckled. "Do you know what you have there, my boy? That's a Tinnell."

Dannen frowned. "A what?"

"A Tinnell. They are excruciatingly stupid in everything but technology; the best mechanics in the galaxy. Tinnell seem to have an inborn knack for fixing things. They are also extremely rare. Where did you find her?"

"None of your business."

Linkaas looked thoughtfully at the pair. "You know, Dannen, this puts a new light on things. I'll tell you what I'll do; you bring that Tinnell to us for study, and I'll forgive your debt. You'll own the ship, free and clear, and you won't have to pay for the shipment."

"Forget it, Linkaas," Dannen snarled. "I know what you mean by `study.' You want to dissect her!"

"Of course not. I must find out if her technical genius can be duplicated. She'll work for me by day, and I'll... study her by night."

"Nothing doing. I'm not going to let you enslave a living being. And I'm not paying for that shipment, or the last payment on the ship."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, my boy," Linkaas said. "But you have no choice. I will have my money, or the Tinnell. And you will give them to me now."

"Dannen?" Purr said, tapping his shoulder.

Dannen ignored her. "Dream on, Linkaas. You've been taking your own spices."

"Dannen?" Purr said again.

"What?" he snapped, annoyed.

"What are those?" she said, pointing out the window. He followed her paw, and saw four small fighters coming towards them from the planet.

"Oh, no," Dannen moaned. "I should've known. We're outta here, Purr. Hold on!"

"Known what?"

"He kept me busy on the comm line just long enough to send some friends."

Purr looked at the ships. "You mean those are friends of yours? Maybe they'll help us."

"Not our friends, Purr, his friends. He hoped I wouldn't notice." With a practiced flip of a switch, he brought the shields up, the engines on-line and

full power. The Lifeline shot forward like a scalded cat, dodging the fighters' blaster fire, and swerved away from the planet.

Dannen smiled out the window, at the fighters swooping towards him. "Okay, suckers, let's dance."

"Dance?"

"Never mind." He reached up and activated the nav computer, and performed a tight bank that shook the lead fighter off his tail for a moment. "Now, where can we go for a while?"

Purr thought. "Don't know."

"That's all right, I don't know either." He began jinking the ship to make a harder target, shaking them in random directions. Then, with a grin, he punched some buttons and fed information into the nav computer.

"Where we go?" Purr asked.

"Alderaan," he replied. "Ever been there?"

Purr thought. It was an effort. "Don't think so."

"I know some people there. They're pretty friendly people, very peaceful." At that moment, a stray shot hit the shields, making Dannen grimace. "And a little peace is something we can use. Don't worry, you'll like it."

"Promise?"

Dannen grinned. "Promise."

A green light began flashing on the panel. Purr reached across the board and pointed at the light. "What's that flashing?"

"It means we're leaving," he answered, pulling back on the levers.

The Lifeline shot into hyperspace, just as the fighters activated their blasters. The lead fighter pilot flicked his comm switch. "LC-1 to base," he said.

"Go ahead, LC-1."

"They got away, sir."

"Yes, I know," the voice of Linkaas rumbled from the speaker. "You weren't fast enough. But no matter, I'll have Lifehold, his Tinnell, and his ship soon enough." Linkaas paused. "Oh, and Captain? You're all fired."

There were four brief flares as the ships self-destructed. Soon there was no evidence that they had ever existed.

* * *

As the stars became elongated lines and the ship's hyperdrive took over, Dannen relaxed. "Okay, we're safe now."

Purr looked at him. "Why did that plant want me?"

Dannen considered. If he told her the truth, she'd probably get confused. Best to keep it simple. "He wants to kill you."

Her eyes opened wide in terror. "Why?"

"Because you're special. And because he knows it would hurt me."

Purr gazed at him. "You won't let him take me, will you?"

Dannen smiled, and gathered her up in his arms. "No, Purr, I won't let him take you. I promise." He scratched her head; during the trip from Dohu, he discovered she liked it. "Come on, let's get some rest. We have a long trip ahead."

"... Imperial fuel container Transtom destroyed en route to main fleet ... treasury ship Walker and Corvette escort attacked and severely damaged by six Rebel X-wings in Fakir sector ... TIE interceptor disappeared while on picket duty near Tatooine ... replenishment convoy ambushed outside of Engira, resulting in loss of three freighters carrying several hundred metric tons of food and ammunition valued at 18.2 million standard credits ... "

— Excerpted from Imperial Commission on the Conduct of the War report: "Effectiveness of Standard Escort and Patrol Tactics Against Enemy Interdiction."

T**here's No Such T'ing as a 'Stock' Light Freighter, Boy!**

Captain Rars Lefken hunched forward, stabbing his finger at his companion for emphasis. He had drunk at least four mugs of home-brewed fozbeer, but it seemed to have had no appreciable effect. He paused to noisily drain his fifth, then continued.

"Garvan's knees — there's more kinds a light freighters limp' around than you've got hairs — uh, scales; sorry, my eyesight ain't what it used ta be. Heck, ever'body who owns one of the blasted t'ings messes wit' it in some way. Vair's eyelids — none of 'em are 'stock' any more.

"Shoot, you take a half-dozen freighters — same model, same year, same shipyard — put 'em in operation for a measly couple'a decades under diff'rent owners, then compare 'em. You know what you'll find?"

Lefken grinned and scratched his bearded chin. Something there squeaked and scuttled up his face and into the thick thatch on the top of his head. He continued.

"You'll find six ships, each wit' a diff'rent drive system. Each wit' a diff'rent sublight speed and shielding manifold. The autopilots on half of 'em will have been gutted and replaced wit' a home-made jobbie; most of 'em will have customized weapons systems. Some will have big, stupid-lookin' secondary cargo holds bolted on the outside of the ship — if they don't, they'll have most of their cargo space replaced wit' extra-hot hyperspace engines.

"Myra's tentacles, son — you can do *anyt'ing* to one of those babies and it'll keep running, just as smoot' and easy as the day you got her."

He gazed out the bar's viewport overlooking the landing field. He smiled warmly at his vessel, *Lefken's Dreams*.

"Maybe that's why we love 'em so."

Lefken rose, nodded pleasantly, and left.

Just Business

The old man let out a loud groan and rolled over onto his back. The alley stunk bad. The Turka brothers stunk worse. From the odor one would tend to think neither of the Efluqui siblings had seen the inside of a sonic shower in months. One would be correct...

Hurka, the elder Turka, sniffed the man's cred sticks like fine Savareen brandy. Efluqui have a very developed sense of smell. Their olfactory ability allows them to detect the presence of another of their kind over 100 meters away;

which is good because Efluqui do not get along famously as a rule. Famously meaning without vibroblades and the rapid depletion of important bodily fluids. They often fail to observe galactic standards of cleanliness in order to mask their scent from other Efluqui. On the whole, the species is nasty, cruel, and violent. Born criminals. The brothers Hurka were one of the few exceptions. Still nasty, cruel, and violent, but they got along. Sort of...

"A lousy 1,500 credits," said Hurka and delivered a swift kick to the fallen man's ribs.

Murka sneered at his brother. "I told you there wasn't no money to be made in robbery." He took his turn giving the old guy some more heel-and-toe treatment. "We need to get back into the black market before we starve."

"I ain't beggin' that lousy Anomid for nothing!" Hurka Turka punctuated his statement with another strong boot that sent the man crashing into a pile of garbage.

"There's plenty of other crimelords around," Murka argued. He was the smarter of the two. Which was like saying one piece of ipplar fruit wasn't quite as filled with maggelworms, so eat up. "Just not on this stupid world."

"And who's idea was that? 'Let's go to Lianna, Hurka. There's no crime there. We can corner da market.' *Rokosh*." Hurka emphasized the Efluqui curse with a wad of phlegm which he sent sailing over his brother's head. Among normal Efluqui that simple action would result in immediate bloodshed.

Murka was momentarily lost in thought, however, and did not notice the challenge.

The old man started crawling away as quickly as he could crawl which wasn't all that fast with multiple contusions, two cracked ribs, and a broken leg.

"The secret of enterprise is seeing a void and filling it. How was I supposed to know this place was a black hole?" Murka shook his jowly head. "Who ever heard of a world where carrying weapons is illegal..."

"We could go talk to Vocta. I hear he's throwing some kind of party at Traxx this weekend." Hurka shrugged his thick shoulders. "Maybe he'll send an invitation..."

"Rokosh!" Vocta accused us of skimming an extra five percent off the Tanalodi deal."

"Which we did," Hurka added helpfully.

"Do you really think he's going to invite us to his party?"

"Anything's possible."

The sound of an approaching repulsorlift drew their attention. Their noses were indeed sharp, but neither had apparently detected the small, spherical droid bobbing toward them.

"What's that thing?" Hurka asked.

Murka squinted. "Looks like a message droid. Rich people use them all the time here."

The compact globe of circuitry in question was indeed a mechanical messenger. The Arakyd Seeker AS-M12, designed to first locate and identify the intended recipient and then deliver a prerecorded message of the sender's choosing.

The small droid hovered in front of them, quietly whirring as it scanned the brothers Turka.

"Sometimes they need a password," Murka advised sagely.

"Like what?"

"Rokosh." How should I know? I wasn't expecting a delivery."

The Seeker beeped twice, apparently satisfied.

"I think we passed."

Murka grinned broadly, displaying yellowing fangs. "Maybe Vocta is sending us a message..."

The beaten and bruised old man had finally reached the end of the alleyway. He was about to cry out for help when the explosion erupted from behind him. The resulting shockwave shook the entire block. Soaring flames erupted

over his head like jets of firespray and thick black smoke trailed high into the bright blue Liann sky.

Yin Vocta leaned over the railing, staring down at the lower level of Bantha Traxx. He held one of the plush bantha dolls sold in the gift shop. He was absently spinning the small stuffed beast by its horns as he surveyed his club. The crowd was still thin, as it often was just after opening. A scattering of beings started to occupy the dance floorpit, moving to their own interpretation of the beat. The tables were occupied mostly by couples now, the larger groups of revelers out for a good time having yet to gather into a wandering herd and trample inside the club.

If Vocta heard Sha'Dria approach, he gave no outward sign. "A credit for your thoughts," she said. With a languorous yawn, Sha'Dria stretched out across the railing beside the Anomid.

Vocta's attention never wavered from below even as he responded, "My dear, you should know by now that my musings are worth a substantial bit more than that..."

"Everything is money with you."

"Yes," he answered without a microsecond's hesitation. "Speaking of which, who's watching your cooling station?"

Sha'Dria gazed over her shoulder at the Oasis. Usually the most crowded of the three bars scattered throughout Traxx, even its business had yet to pick up. "Sysrci is covering for me. I think she can handle the current crowd."

"Yes, I suppose she can." Vocta finally turned his attention to the beautiful woman beside him. "Though with nowhere near the panache of its usual tender." The corners of his eyes crinkled, which was the only way to tell whether the Anomid was smiling underneath his vocalizer mask. "The line between competence and adeptness is often the difference between loss and profit."

Sha'Dria adjusted her own intricately designed mask, the cheeks coloring ever so slightly. "My, my... Was that a compliment?"

“Merely a statement of fact,” Vocta said, interlacing his dozen fingers into a complex pattern around the bantha doll. He absently wondered if her mask was empathic or merely translucent to color. “Take from it what you wish.”

“I will,” she said, the trace of a smile dancing across her lips. “And thank you.”

Vocta nodded absently, resuming his observation. After a moment, he indicated an attractive couple snuggled up in a corner booth with a bottle.

“Over there... You see those two?”

Sha’Dria nodded, watching as the young blond woman poured another drink for her tall, dark, and handsome companion. “How romantic,” she sighed.

“Oh, yes,” Vocta said, his eyes glinting with mischief. “That lovely young woman looks positively stunning in that diaphanous little black dress, however I’m sure her suitor won’t think she looks quite so desirable in her usual ISB dress grays...”

“How could you possibly -- ”

“I have my ways.” For a moment, he seemed reluctant to elaborate, then finally relented. “The girl arrived early and ordered a bottle of vintage Bespín Port. Its unique sweet and sour taste is an ideal choice for disguising any foreign substances. In fact the drink is used so extensively by assassins and other unsavory types, it has earned the nickname of Bespín Surprise.”

“Foreign substances?”

“Such as the sleep inducer being released right now from that oversized gaudy ring on her thumb. ISB standard issue device. Rather obvious, but effective.”

“Well...” Sha’Dria bit her lower lip. “Sometimes even undercover agents fall in love.”

“Yes, but not with their marks. That young man is most likely an Alliance operative. I’ve seen him in here before, heard him asking the wrong questions.

Questions that got him noticed.” The Anomid shrugged noncommittally. “She’s probably been reeling him in like a glowflounder on a line for quite some time.”

Sha'Dria shook her head in amazement, then carefully studied Vocta's impassive face. "So, you can tell a spy just by looking at him. Or her."

Vocta coolly met her stare, and they locked eyes for a moment. "Not always."

Before Sha'Dria could respond, Vocta noticed Tezz gesturing in the distance. The nervous human seemed to be desperate to gain his master's attention, without alerting Sha'Dria. If Tezz was daring enough to interrupt, then something important was occurring. Most likely something bad.

The Anomid tilted his head almost imperceptibly, hoping that even a dimrod like Tezz would pick up on the sign.

Vocta touched a hand to the bartender's bare shoulder. "Be a dear and save my space." The Anomid started toward his office, and was relieved to see Tezz had already disappeared from sight. Maybe his assistant *was* actually a bit smarter than a ronto. "I'll be right back."

"Is that a threat or a promise?" Sha'Dria called softly after him.

Vocta looked over his shoulder at her, offering a quick wink. He tossed the stuffed bantha over to her. "Take from it what you wish."

The door slid shut behind Vocta as he entered his luxurious office. Tezz was already perched next to Vocta's antique braidenwood desk, his usual expression of utter anxiety at the ready. This time however, the palpable distress was mixed with a dash of distraction.

Vocta slipped into the cool white replihide chair and waited. After a few long moments, he stared up at Tezz... Drummed a fingertip... Admired the crossed gaderffii sticks mounted on the wall... "You know, I've yet to complete that Jedi mind-reading correspondence course..."

"Sir?"

The Anomid let out an audible sigh and waved a six-fingered hand. "What's the problem, Tezz?"

"It's Na-Grujha, sir."

Vocta cocked an eyebrow. "What about him?"

“He’s left countless messages for you to contact him in reference to...” Tezz lowered his voice to conspiracy level. “The shipment.”

The Anomid resisted the urge to roll his eyes. If there was one place on Lianna where you could talk freely without the slightest concern of surveillance or eavesdropping equipment, it was Vocta’s office. “I should know better than to deal with an Ipharian-Da’Lor. Even a wealthy one...”

“Na-Grujha is most insistent about speaking with you about the matter. He is rather... Intimidating.”

Vocta chuckled. “Ah, Tezz... There are only two categories of dangerous beings in this entire galaxy. Intimidators and achievers. An intimidator puts his victim in a ship’s airlock without a vac suit and holds a finger over the control switch. The intimidator is only dangerous because someone else allows him to be,” Vocta said as he activated his personal communications unit.

The Vec-Tech Holocomm 450 built into his desk was cutting edge in both transmission quality and security issues, with the usual elegant simplicity of Vec-Tech design. The high technology company produced items that were usually second to none in quality and price, which should come as no surprise if one happened to know Yin Vocta owned the profitable business.

“Then there are the achievers...” Vocta entered his passcode and punched in the numbers. Finished, he looked up at Tezz and winked. “They just blow up the whole damned ship in the first place.”

Tezz considered that for a moment, and immediately knew which methodology his boss sanctioned. A tiny shiver ran down his back.

There was a momentary hum as information instantly transferred through the comm. Vocta turned his chair to face the large three-dimensional holoscreen that slid out of the wall behind his desk, unfolding itself into a triangular frame. “Leave me.”

Tezz quickly obeyed, vacating the office.

The air inside the viewer crackled to eerie life, projecting the ferocious image of Itahn Na-Grujha in three terrifying spatial dimensions. The serpentine

Ipharian-Da'Lor had a fearsome visage, with an elongated snout, large slanted pupils the color of fire-gems, and row after row of razor-sharp teeth. For this reason the majority of his species who dealt with the public concealed their faces in order to facilitate interaction. Na-Grujha did not particularly care if he caused someone discomfort. On the contrary, he rather enjoyed it.

"Vocta," Na-Grujha hissed. "I want those detonators..."

"Relax Itahn, you'll have them as promised."

"When?"

"On schedule." Vocta's face remained impassive. "One standard week from today."

"Do you have them now?"

"It makes little difference whether I do or do not. Our agreement specified the transaction date."

"I could put them to good use immediately," the Ipharian-Da'Lor said, his words punctuated by the off-screen *clik-clak* sound caused by the extension and retraction of his tail spike.

"I don't doubt that," Vocta replied dryly. "As a matter of fact, I am awaiting their arrival..."

"When is the shipment expected?"

"Again, that is not your concern."

Na-Grujha's spinal ridge quivered with rage. "I am spending one quarter of a million credits, Vocta. Anything you do while under the auspices of our agreement *is* my concern."

Vocta's eyes narrowed to slits. "Tell me, Itahn... Are you familiar with the old Barabel saying about treading lightly upon the gravmine field? Try to remember that I am your facilitator. Not your servant."

"And you try to remember that I am not one of your usual two-credit nerf-robbers. Until our contract is fulfilled and I am in possession of those detonators, you are what I say you are."

Vocta tilted his head as if admonishing a small child. His tone of voice adjusted accordingly. "I do hope that wasn't intended as a threat."

"Of course not." Na-Grujha smiled without a hint of benevolence. It was difficult to be disarming with a mouthful of razors. "Think of it more as a rather obvious insinuation."

"I see... How fortunate for both of us then." Vocta paused for a moment. "By the way, how is Dekalba doing?"

Na-Grujha seemed momentarily bewildered. "I haven't heard from that old pirate in months. Word is he vanished into the Expanse while attempting the Reecris Run." The reptilian eyes blinked in rapid succession. "Why?"

"His name just popped into my head for some reason," Vocta said with a shrug. "Hmmm... Oddly enough, I believe Dekalba's last words to me were, 'You better watch your back, Vocta.'" The Anomid chuckled. "Funny how you recall these things at the strangest of times. Don't you think?"

"Yes," Na-Grujha hissed through his front row of incisors, "Utterly whimsical."

"I assume then, that we are clear on this matter."

"Crystalline," Na-Grujha said, then added innocently: "By the way, I hear your staff assassins..." He momentarily touched an embarrassed claw to his mouth.

"Whoops... I mean assistants, are off on a mission. Pity that neither R'Kayza nor Tice will be there to keep an eye on you during this dangerous time. From one former pilot to another, I'd make sure to watch my six."

"I appreciate the advice. It always warms the hearts when a friend looks out for me." Vocta abruptly shut off the holocomm unit and the Ipharian-Da'Lor crimelord vanished like a Defel in the night.

Vocta reclined back in the comfortable replihide chair, steepling his fingers under his chin. Usually it was the Anomid who cornered the information market. Apparently, he had slightly underestimated Na-Grujha's resources. Not a matter to dwell on, though. The oversight had been noted, and it was time to move on... Vocta always allowed himself mistakes. As long as they were never repeated.

“Excuse me for a moment, while I freshen up,” Solette said with a sly wink. She stood up from the table and sauntered toward the refresher, moving with a slow sensual gait that utilized her assets to maximum efficiency. The slinky and rather abbreviated dress clinging to her athletic physique only increased the overall seductive effectiveness.

Broegan watched her retreating form, completely mesmerized by her rhythmic sway. He blinked a few times to try and clear his head, but thoughts were traveling as slow as the glaciers of Hoth. More than anything he was tired, which was strange because he had gotten a good night’s rest. Broegan always made sure to do so while on assignment. Especially one as important as this. He certainly didn’t want to throw a hydrospanner in these particular works...

Maybe another shot of Bespin Port will clear things up a bit, he thought as he reached over to refill his emptied glass.

He couldn’t quite believe his luck so far... Not only had he found someone to utilize as part of his cover, but that someone happened to be a beautiful girl! Even better, she seemed genuinely interested in him. Enough so to buy the drinks herself, anyway. That had never happened to Broegan before.

He grinned through the haze that drifted across his consciousness and finished pouring. Though more Port had landed on the table surface than in his glass tumbler, there was enough for a few more sweet-sour swallows.

Solette stepped inside the female refresher room and locked the door behind her. She inverted the right strap of her dress, revealing a tiny comlink pinned to the soft cloth. As Solette keyed the secure device, the private communications channel automatically scrambled itself, to be decoded kilometers away at a concealed Imperial military facility.

“Clear,” she stated sotto voice and then added with a hint of irritation: “What is it, Control?”

A tinny voice answered. “We have detected an encoded transmission from your location. Originating inside Vocta’s office.”

“Decrypt?”

“Negative,” came the filtered response. “The holo-carrier was highly sophisticated. However, the broadcast was tracked by our Beta-Hound Program through each of its bandwidth jump points... To a location on Lianna.”

Solette’s mouth fell open slightly. “The buyer is here, then. Transmit the precise address to my datapad as soon as possible.”

“Acknowledged.” There was a slight pause. “Status report?”

“With this information, I may no longer have need of the Rebel.” Her full lips slid back in a feral grin. “I assume disposal parameters apply?”

“That is affirmative... once information is confirmed. Control out.”

Broegan lifted the glass to his lips and noticed a huge misshapen giant towering in front of him. Startled, he coughed the tiny swig of Port out into the air. As he slammed the glass back down to the table to confront the monster, Broegan’s face reddened. The man who stood there had appeared grotesque at first glance but only because he’d been viewed through the prismatic bottom of the tumbler. In actuality, the newcomer was a fairly thin waiter, holding a small courtesy datapad. Like nearly everything else in the club, it was emblazoned with the stylized ‘Bantha Traxx’ bantha pawprint.

The waiter handed over the datapad without a word and slipped away. Broegan activated the control buttons and stared at the message that appeared. The words were difficult to make out in his current condition. After much blinking and straining, Broegan found that by squeezing his eyes partways shut he could finally decipher the lettering.

It read, ‘YOUR DINING COMPANION IS A MEMBER OF THE IMPERIAL
SUNBATHERS AND BIRDWATCHERS

- A FRIEND.’

Solette smiled into the vanity mirror as she readjusted her dress. A quick hip wiggle set everything in its place, including the cool plasteel of the ionic tingler tucked into her thigh garter. Of course with the speed with which that idiot Rebel was downing sleep inducer-laced Port, she didn’t even need the back-up weapon.

Every mission should be this simple. At this rate, she'd have her hands on the shipment in no time, not to mention an entire Rebel Ops cell.

She ran a manicured hand through the mass of blond ringlets, putting the finishing touches on the package.

And what a package it was... She blew herself a kiss in the mirror and prowled to the door with the assured gait of a born predator.

The crowd at Traxx was beginning to expand to usual levels. More and more customers, the vast majority of them male, surrounded the cooling station known as The Oasis. Sha'Dria found herself buzzing back and forth, pouring brandy and ale and lum, delivering knowing smiles and quick winks, and collecting generous tips.

While running glasses through the sonic cleanser, Sha'Dria happened to glance over at a table occupied by a half-empty bottle of Bepin Port. The blond woman that Vocta had pointed out as an ISB Agent stood there for a moment, staring at the liquid left sloshed across the tabletop. For the merest fraction of time, Sha'Dria saw a look of rage spill across the young woman's face and then just as suddenly the ravishing countenance returned to its original placidity.

Vocta watched Sha'Dria closely as she turned back to the customers. Her facial expression would remain a mystery beneath the concealment of the N'Noch, her term for the intricately designed mask she wore. Sha'Dria gave nothing away, even with her body language. Not the tiniest hint of emotion could be detected at present, her entire being obstinately refusing to let the veneer slip - as the foolish ISB woman did upon discovery that her Alliance Special Ops mark had hastily jumped system.

The Anomid had paid special attention to those mysterious eyes with which Sha'Dria viewed the world. His monitor unit was zeroed in point blank so her otherwise obscured face filled the screen. Bantha Traxx boasted one of the clearest vid surveillance systems in the sector, capable of covering the entire club. With the aid of its macrozoom remote lenses, Vocta could count the hairs on a Wookiee. With their magnification he was very nearly there sitting across from Sha'Dria and staring directly into her pupils, yet there was little to

see; the sensation analogous to staring into a mirror. Vocta's silent inquiries were reflected back upon him...

Vocta never met a species that he could not comprehend simply by staring into their ocular organs for a short time. (Those that possessed them at least.) But this girl... Shalana Driana, Sha'Dria as she preferred to be called, she was not like any other he had ever known. Her enigmatic presence had graced his establishment for over a year and he knew as much about Sha'Dria now as he did when he hired her; if not less, for many of his preconceived notions had been blasted into vapebait.

The Anomid sighed in frustration. He lived and breathed information. This girl who hid so much, not only behind her mask but her eyes as well, was effectively choking him. And the worst part... He thoroughly enjoyed it.

Vocta continued to study that lovely visage upon his screen, tracing a finger along her cheekbone. To an Anomid this was an extremely intimate gesture, for it meant that the subject's vocalizer mask had been removed.

His door chime sounded abruptly, effectively shattering the moment.

Vocta didn't bother to look up. "Go away."

Tezz's voice seemed more anxious than usual. "Sir, he's rather insiste -- Oof!"

There was the distinct sound of someone hitting the door, then it slid open, revealing a crisply uniformed officer. Commander Byeslee of the Liann Military Guard. Byeslee strutted inside, sucking most of the air out of the room as he puffed out his chest to display row after row of medals. The Commander was followed inside by two deputies, a plasteel wall impersonating a male human and a rather lovely young Seneerian woman, who immediately took up standard flanking positions. All three members of the Guard rested a hand on their blaster pistols.

Vocta rolled his eyes.

"Will that be all, sir?" Tezz asked the life-size statue of Tsincria, one of the greatest Anomid dealmakers to ever live.

"Yes, Tezz," Vocta answered with a prolonged sigh. "You're dismissed."

Tezz mistakenly bowed to the statue and walked out of the office. Rubbing his bruised head, Tezz first thumbed the control panel and, after the door had actually opened, he stepped out.

“My new minor domo,” Vocta said nodding toward the retreating form of Tezz.

“Don’t you mean major domo?”

“Yes well, he still needs some work,” Vocta explained flatly. “And he had references, if you can imagine... Well, that’s the last time I listen to Jabba.”

“Hard to find good help these days.” Byeslee sneered.

“Not only in the private sector but apparently in the Liann Military Guard as well.”

Byeslee abruptly stepped forward. From the look on his face, it wasn’t apparent whether the man was going to stop at the edge of Vocta’s desk or simply burst right through it.

Vocta reclined back in his chair just in case. “And I see the word ‘private’ has finally seceded from your vocabulary.”

The Commander stopped short, quickly sliding his fingers across the polished surface of the Anomid’s desk. “Yes, it was replaced by the word ‘crimelord’. A recent and unwanted import to our world.” Byeslee paused for dramatic effect. “Much like yourself.”

The Anomid interlaced his fingers and stared at Byeslee. “Is there a compelling reason for this little visit or did you just stop in to say hello?”

“I don’t make social calls.”

“And more’s the pity considering your gregarious nature.”

“Shut up, Vocta.” Byeslee pointed a gloved finger dead center of the Anomid’s chest. “You’re coming with us.”

Vocta winked at the female officer, who reddened slightly under his approving gaze. “As pleasant as I find that idea, may I ask why?”

“Questioning. Earlier today, there was an explosion in an alleyway that killed the Turka brothers.” The Commander ticked off what happened on his fingers. “Pieces of a message droid, various Efluqui parts, traces of detonite, and the stink of your involvement.”

“How ingenious. Equip an Arakyd Seeker with a small storage compartment, some detonite, and a proximity detonator, then program it to hunt down a target’s bio-signature and explode. I wish I’d thought of that.” The Anomid shook his head. “So poor Murka and Hurka are gone? With that kind of drop in the crime rate, I suppose you’ll have nothing better to do than harass innocent merchants trying to make an honest living.”

“You couldn’t detect an honest act if it sidled up and kicked you in the --”

“Anyway, how am I *allegedly* connected to this heinous deed?”

“That’s exactly what I want to know. I’ve heard rumors of your involvement with the Turkas. Using the Efluqui scum as go-betweens for black market dealings with the Tanalodi clan... Not an auspicious crowd to be linked with, is it?”

“That’s a wonderfully imaginative story.” Vocta said, his eyes crinkling with delight. “Although apparently there’s no factual correlation, or I’d venture to say I’d be in custody at the moment.”

“Music to my ears.” The Commander gestured for Vocta to stand. “Come on, we’ll finish this at the precinct house.”

“Regretfully, I must decline,” Vocta answered, remaining pleasantly seated. “If I was languishing away in an interrogation room then who would be left to plan the grandest party of the year tomorrow night?”

“Oh yes, your wonderful little soiree that everyone’s talking about.” Byeslee leaned over the desk, his multiple medals jangling with authority. “I’ll be keeping a close eye on the proceedings, you know.”

“Did you receive an invitation?”

“Must have gotten lost.”

Vocta nodded sagely. “The *only* explanation.”

“Don’t think for a moment I’d hesitate carrying out my duty under the law over an anniversary gala for a club owned by the likes of you.”

The Anomid shrugged. “So many dignitaries and socialites would be rather disappointed especially since a considerable percentage of the proceeds will go to charity. All the Santhes will be there, including Lady Valles... Perhaps you’ve heard of them. They own this little planet.”

“I don’t care about your friends in high places, Vocta. Because when I have the appropriate evidence even they won’t be able to save you.” Byeslee stood, straightening his uniform and adjusting his medals. “Very well. We’ll conclude your questioning after the party. And in the meantime, should I find even the merest monofilament’s link between yourself and the murder of the Turkas, well then...” The Commander let the threat hang in the air.

“You’ll give me a good citizenship award?” Vocta asked innocently, eliciting a snicker from the Seneerian girl which was quickly choked off under Byeslee’s withering gaze.

“Good day,” the Commander said, sharply turning on his heel and marching out the door.

The mute plasteel wall immediately followed but the Seneerian girl lingered just long enough to smile and accept a quick wink from Vocta before joining her comrades.

The door slid shut and Vocta was alone again.

Almost.

“Tik chakka ataidi,” said a gravelly voice behind Vocta.

The Anomid didn’t bother to turn as the small black-clad creature separated itself from the shadows. The Jawa smoothed its black leather robing and continued chattering in a near unrecognizable blur of speech.

Vocta nodded in agreement.

Jik’Tal drew a thin vibroknife from his sleeve. The Jawa’s large yellow eyes moved along the edge of the wickedly serrated blade, which reflected their sinister glow.

The Anomid couldn't help but smile at that. "Soon, my friend... Soon."

"Hatak me chiza nebat."

"Yes, far too much. Apparently one of the Tanalodi clan apparently spilled his guts." Vocta slowly turned his head to nod at the Jawa. "I think it's only fair we return the favor. Don't you?"

He received no answer. Jik'Tal was already gone.

"Give me a home where the rontos still roam and the Jawas and Krayt Dragons play..." Vocta hummed the rest of the tune idly, lost in his thoughts. Until a familiarly grating voice finally interrupted.

"Sir?" Tezz poked his head inside the office. "I rang the chime, but there was no answer... My apologies for disturbing you, but I wanted to make sure you were --"

"Fine, fine." Vocta stood, stretching his shoulders. "Is there news?"

His assistant nodded. "I just received a curious transmission from Mah-Luu's people. The shipment will arrive tomorrow night at exactly 1900 hours via speeder truck." Tezz arched an eyebrow. "Which is during the gala... Is that right, sir?"

"What better way to sneak in the dewback than through the front door?"

"Sir?"

"Never mind," Vocta sighed, then arched a speculative eyebrow. "Wouldn't want the dessert to go flat."

"Ah, yes... Only the best for your guests."

"Yes, Tezz," Vocta agreed. "Only the best."

"And according to the invoice there is the matter of 10 crates instead of five..."

"Tezz?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you have the slightest idea of what I do?"

Tezz was taken aback by the odd question. "Of course... You operate a very popular club as well as perform the CEO duties for your company, Vec-Tech."

"What exactly did you do for Jabba?"

"I booked his entertainment," Tezz answered proudly. "You know Sy Snootles and the Max Rebo band? My idea to bring them to the Palace. Also Figrin D'an and the Modal Nodes. A relative coup as this was at the time before they hit it big..." His voice trailed off at Vocta's soft laughter.

"That bloated space slug certainly put one over on me this time," Vocta said ruefully. "That's what Jabba meant when he said that you could 'run the whole show...'"

"Sir?"

"Never mind." Vocta indicated a chair. "Have a seat. It's time for a crash course in managing my affairs."

Tezz shrugged and sat down. "Very well."

The Anomid leaned across the desk, eye sparkling. "Tell me, what do you know about thermal detonators?"

Sha'Dria stared up at the night sky, hidden among the starscrapers of Lianna. She found small patches of heaven in between the towering architecture and smiled at each new discovery. Sha'Dria imagined herself floating among them, or drifting atop a pool of fragrant steamwater, anywhere really except here seated upon a trash compactor in a dingy alleyway with a fragrance all its own.

With a sigh she peeked at her jeweled chronometer. Her break was almost up...

"A credit for your thoughts..."

Sha'Dria looked down at her employer standing there beside the compactor, his expensive clothing looking out of place among the piles of refuse. She couldn't help but laugh.

"Do I look like that cheap a date to you?"

“Hardly.” Vocta hoisted himself up beside her. “Do you mind if I join you?”

She shrugged. “Hey, it’s your trash compactor.”

“So it is,” Vocta nodded.

“What are you doing out here?”

“It’s also my alleyway.”

“So it is.”

“I suddenly realized that I spend most of my waking hours in that office and had the dreadful thought that I was turning into my father.” Vocta scanned the stars above. “Such a beautiful night. Shame to waste it alone.”

Sha’Dria gave him a sideways glance. “You’re a complicated man.”

“Please call me Yin.”

“I’d be out of line as your employee.”

“You’d be out of line to refuse.” Vocta glanced at her and smiled. “And I’d be out of line to make it an order. Do as you wish.”

“I usually do.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Vocta said. He noticed a new rainbow-threaded bracelet around her wrist. “A token of someone’s love?”

“Hmmm?” She followed his gaze and chuckled. “Oh, that? No. Yes. Sort of... It’s from Miri. A girl I work with at Santhe House.”

“The charity of the moment for Liann socialites... A home for orphans is it not?”

Sha’Dria nodded. “I volunteer there twice a week. It’s nice.”

“The children must enjoy it.”

“I do too. It’s only a few hours and you know,” she said, turning to stare at Vocta. “It’s the little gestures that count the most.”

Vocta met her eyes... "There is an old saying among my people. Words as lies, actions as truth."

"And what lies have you told me?"

"I --"

"Sir!"

The Anomid shut his eyes and took a deep breath. "What is it, Tezz?"

Perched half outside the rear door, Tezz nodded his head pointedly. "I think you want to see this..."

Sha'Dria hopped down from the compactor. "I should be getting back to work, anyway." She brushed past Tezz and vanished inside.

"Your instincts are improving," Vocta said, glowering at his assistant, "however, we still need to work on your timing."

Tezz ushered Vocta into the supply room, where containers of food and spirits were stacked ceiling-high. Jik'Tal stood amidst the surplus cache, along with a scrawny Liann resident who was currently doubled over - mostly due to the fact that the Jawa had a fistful of the human's hair.

"Forno Tanalodi. Two-credit thief, aspiring black marketeer, and all-around black nerf of the clan. Although they don't seem to mind making use of you when they need something illegal procured. I suppose it's nice to feel wanted..." Vocta tilted his head down to look into the young man's face. "How have you been boy?"

"What is the meaning of this? I demand to --" Forno's ranting was abruptly halted as Jik'Tal placed the curved vibroknife at the human's throat.

"Jik'Tal doesn't like shouting," Vocta explained. "Neither do I. For that matter, I also happen to detest beings who talk to the authorities about my private dealings. Particularly when such discourse can land myself or associates of mine in small, dank riiv-infested cells."

"I never said a word to Byeslee," the young man stammered. "It must have been someone in my organization. The Commander arrested three of them last week for class-two infractions."

Vocta didn't like the sound of that. "But you conversed with someone else?"

"There was this girl asking about you," he began reluctantly. "She looked harmless enough. Real friendly and pretty and she bought me a drink and the next thing I knew I couldn't stop talking." Tears welled in his eyes. "I swear I tried to stop, but every question she asked I answered. Oh it was horrible, like she had control of my mind." Forno sniffled. "I think she was a Dark Jedi or something..."

"I doubt it would require a Master of the Force to dominate *your* intellect. The woman merely laced your beverage with some sort of truth serum." Vocta rolled his eyes. "Let me guess... Attractive blond, small dress, big bottle of Bespin Port."

"That's it! That's it exactly. I was gonna come and tell you about it, I swear."

"But?"

"But she showed me a laser cutter and told me if I said anything to anyone she'd sever my --"

"Enough!" Vocta couldn't quite believe his ears. "This is most distressing. Imperial ISB agents don't waste their talents on routine surveillance." He looked meaningfully at Tezz. "They know about the shipment." Vocta's eyes slowly found their way back to Tanalodi. "Don't they?"

There was only silence.

"Tekka ne chas mekk?" inquired Jik'Tal.

"Yes I'm all through with him. Thank you, my friend."

"Ootaynee!" exclaimed the Jawa as he prepared to slit Forno's throat. The young human let out a terrified howl.

Vocta held up a hand. "Tsk-tsk. You know how I detest seeing violence..."

Forno looked momentarily relieved.

“Teska nu?” Jik’Tal asked, a bit perplexed.

“No, no. Go ahead and kill him,” Vocta said waving his hand dismissively. “Just take him outside first.”

Solette watched through her macrobinoculars as Forno Tanalodi met the Maker in the alleyway behind Bantha Traxx with a little help from a somewhat nasty Jawa who seemed to thoroughly enjoy his job.

“Shame,” she said softly from over three rooftops away. “Good idiots are hard to find.” This mission had provided two of them, well one now. Between Forno and that Rebel ignoramus Broegan, she could have ran the operation on droid autopilot while having her nails done.

Speaking of which... Solette glanced down at her new manicure. The pinky fingernail had been chipped. That was very upsetting. For 50 credits, she expected better. The old adage was true. *If you want something done right, threaten the doer with death.* When she was done here, she might go back to the beauty salon and have a long and meaningful talk with that vapehead manicurist. A conversation that would most likely involve some pain inducing equipment. The thought of that scenario brought a smile back to her face.

Solette slid the macrobinoculars back into her small replihide satchel and activated her secure comlink. “Control are you there?”

In his office, Vocta hovered over his monitor awaiting a confirmation tone from the communications relay. When he received it, the Anomid touched a small button.

A message scrawled across the screen and he spoke softly into the sensitive microphone which digitally altered his voice. “Control here. Status report...”

“On one hand, we’ve got the buffoonish Broegan of Alliance Special Ops. On the other hand is lovely Solette, champion of the Empire. Situated directly in the middle is our pertinacious Commander Byeslee and the Liann Military Guard. And now I find out that insipid excuse for reptiloid Na-Grujha is here on Lianna, most likely ready to double-cross me as soon as the shipment arrives.” Vocta sighed loudly, looking up from the datapad. “This is a bit more complicated than I originally thought.”

"You could cancel the party," suggested Tezz helpfully.

"And lose all those potential credits, let alone the prestige? Not an option."

"Isn't that better than losing the shipment, or Na-Grujha's money." Tezz ticked them off on his fingers. "Or your freedom, or your life, or --"

"Enough."

"I suppose you could just kill them all..." After an uncomfortably long silence from Vocta, Tezz quickly added, "I was, of course, merely joking."

Vocta cocked an eyebrow.

Tezz sighed. "Perhaps it would be wiser to accommodate, sir."

"I never accommodate if I can help it," Vocta said. "I prefer to manipulate."

"Given the circumstances, that approach will be... difficult."

"Difficult is not commensurate with impossible. There are levels of difficulty you know."

"Really? And which level involves pulling a Death Star out of your --"

"Actually," Vocta interrupted, suitably impressed, "that gives me an interesting idea."

The night of the benefit gala Bantha Traxx was shut down to all but the VIP crowd. Immaculately garbed valets awaited the guests at the front door, ready to check invitations and park expensive speeders.

The interior of the club was tastefully decorated, although it wasn't hard for a being to notice that a party was about to take place. Hydroballoons littered the floor and gravballons jumbled together at the ceiling. Multi-colored lumalamps sparkled in every corner. Holostreamers hung from the roof fixtures, changing color depending on the illumination. The cooling stations were manned by their superlative tenders, suitably dressed for the occasion. Sha'Dria looked resplendent in a light blue Shimmerata gown, her hair trimmed with purple-and-white star lilies.

Vocta adjusted the collar of his custom-fitted L'Dau tuxedo, tying the matching replihide half-cloak in place. He took another quick glance at Sha'Dria who caught him this time and offered an encouraging wink.

Tezz assisted his boss, knotting the cloak cord in a three-handed bow.

Vocta nodded his thanks and took a calming breath. "You know what to do when the shipment arrives."

"Like my own name, sir."

"Excellent." The Anomid patted Tezz's shoulder and went off to make the final preparations.

As he passed the Oasis, Sha'Dria said with a smile: "A credit for your thoughts."

Vocta looked her over with an appraising eye. "I was just thinking how astonishingly beautiful you appear this evening... I don't think I've ever seen a woman who looked good enough to put me to shame."

Sha'Dria blushed, or at least her mask did.

"But you come close, my dear," the Anomid said with a wink and then vanished down the hallway.

Her mouth hanging open in momentary surprise, Sha'Dria quickly recovered and chuckled to herself.

The crowd had streamed in steadily for the last hour and the club was brimming with exquisitely outfitted patrons. The most famous faces on Lianna could be spotted in the crowd, laughing, joking, and drinking... The things that socialites do best. They were all present: Terri Karl, Phillip Santhe, Sian Tirc, Kashan Santhe, Jerris Santhe, Turen Makee, and of course, Lady Valles Santhe.

Vocta dutifully made the rounds, playing the perfect host, complimenting the women and making small talk with the men. A 'My dear, you are a vision' here, a 'Those Corellian Bandits may take the Gravball championship yet' there. He personally refilled drinks, offered investment tips to those curious about Vec-Tech, and swapped gossip with the principals of Lianna's chattermill.

The animated Anomid finished pouring out the last of his brandy decanter into the glass of Turan Makee and started toward the kitchen for another bottle. Halfway there he was distracted by a particularly sheer crimson dress clinging to the lithe body of an attractive blond woman... Solette.

Not paying full attention to where he was going, Vocta accidentally bumped into a young man perfectly dressed for a soiree of this caliber, had it been held two years ago. Broegan mumbled his apologies and hastily blended unsuccessfully back into the crowd.

Vocta took a deep breath and checked his chronometer.

"Expecting someone? Or maybe *something*..." a familiar voice asked.

The Anomid looked up at Commander Byeslee, resplendent in his full military dress uniform replete with rank cylinders, epaulet cords, and enough medals to smelt down into an astromech droid.

Vocta silently began systematically examining the Commander's livery.

"May I help you?" Byeslee asked, recoiling with a noisy jangle of awarded honors.

"Just searching for the antigrav device."

"What?"

"Well with all those medals I just assumed you had one hidden somewhere on your person," Vocta said, "or else you'd no doubt tip over."

A few guests standing nearby chuckled into their dinner napkins. Before the red-faced Byeslee could respond, however, a soft Mon Calamari sea chime sounded - announcing the dessert course was about to be served.

Tezz appeared from the kitchen doors directing a small repulsorlift sled occupied by five open crates of delectable pastries, cakes, cookies, and frosted treats. Appreciative murmurs ran through the crowd as the sweet feast was set out on tables.

"Only five crates?" Byeslee asked with a dark grin. "I thought you ordered ten. In fact I'd bet on it."

“Pardon?” Vocta asked innocently.

Tezz ducked back into the kitchen, but promptly found himself backing out into the main room again at blaster-point. The crowd, hovering over the dessert tables, paused in amazement to watch a pair of Liann Military Guard armed with blaster pistols exit the kitchen, escorting out Tezz and the waiters. They were followed directly by another pair of Guards who brought out a second sled occupied by five more closed crates. They looked identical to the first set, marked ‘FRAGILE - HANDLE WITH CARE - PASTRIES.’

“Look at that. Why there they are...” Byeslee sauntered over. “I wonder what’s inside?”

“You’d think a Commander of the Guard would know how to read,” Vocta said flatly.

“Why don’t we open it up?”

“I don’t think it’s time,” Vocta said, gesturing at the tables. “Still plenty left, you see.”

The crowd was now curious, pressing in closer to get a better view.

“I insist.” Byeslee motioned to the Guard surrounding the crates. They holstered their weapons and one of the men hefted a pryspanner...

The whine of a blaster bolt quieted everyone. The blast struck the ceiling, sending sparks showering down.

Broegan pointed his smoking heavy blaster at the Guard. “Nobody move. We’re taking those crates out of here.”

“You and what army?” sneered Byeslee.

Five other guests immediately drew their own weapons, covering the rest of the Guard. The Alliance Special Ops team had finally revealed itself.

Apparently that’s just what Solette was waiting for... She stepped from the crowd behind Broegan, pressing her ionic tinger against his temple. “Good advice,” she said, breathing into his ear. “I suggest you listen to yourself.”

As the Rebels turned their weapons on the woman holding their leader, a squad of Imperial Stormtroopers marched out of the supply room, brandishing their blaster carbines and taking up position around the room.

Vocta whispered to Tezz, who had sidled up next to him. "Make sure we don't restock those."

Rebels and Imperials took aim at each other...

Solette addressed the crowd. "This establishment is now quarantined and I am confiscating those crates by the authority of the Empire. If you remain where you are, no one will be unnecessarily injured."

"I heartily agree," said Commander Byeslee as over a dozen more of his Military Guard burst into the club and sealed off every available exit. Each one wielded a heavy blaster rifle and currently had it pointed at either an Alliance or Imperial operative, who in turn shifted their gunsights to the newly arrived Liann Guard targeting them.

Byeslee continued: "You are all under arrest for gross violation of Liann Ordinance 316.640 prohibiting the possession of any and all weapons without a permit." He directed his own blaster pistol at Vocta, gesturing at the crates on the second repulsorlift sled. "And you are charged with importing thermal detonators onto the planet." Drawn to the spotluma, the Commander raised his voice even louder and gestured theatrically for the enjoyment of the crowd. "And not just your standard weapons of mass destruction either. Units custom-built by Luu-Mah 'Thermal' Mah-Luu with enough baradium to create 100-meter blast spheres. These uncommonly powerful detonators have a street value of 10,000 credits each. With five crates holding 50 detonators each, the grand total of this contraband equals 250,000 credits." Here he paused to allow the crowd a whistle of appreciative incredulity. "Which is how much Yin Vocta was going to pocket once he sold these terrible weapons to the Ipharian-Da'Lor crimelord, Itahn Na-Grujha."

It was truly a dramatic moment; Byeslee was practically glowing. And then events became even more exciting as a small explosion rocked the club. The floorpit at the center of the room that served as the Traxx dance floor suddenly vanished amidst a formidable puff of smoke. A large hole opened

and four beings hoisted themselves out of the sewer tunnel that ran beneath the club. The shadowy figures clambered up into the room under the cover of the artificial haze.

When the smoke cleared, it was difficult to say who was more surprised, the party or the party crashers. Itahn Na-Grujha stood in the middle of the chaos, wielding a pair of blaster pistols and snapping his tail spike outward in menacing fashion. The crimelord was flanked by three Gamorrean mercs armed with large vibro-axes. Na-Grujha's intent was obviously to incite fear into a docile crowd. Unfortunately, he could not possibly foresee that a large element of this specific crowd was very heavily armed.

"All right you nerfs, stay calm! We just want the cra--"

However ignorant of the situation Na-Grujha may have been, he immediately found himself up to date... As a quarter of the attendant weaponry shifted in his direction.

Not wanting to feel left out, he pointed his own guns. "I'll kill you for this Vocta!"

The Anomid was immediately swarmed by eight black-robed Jawa Enforcers who had not been seen or heard from the entire evening, yet suddenly appeared out of the surrounding shadows. Each carried a stun pistol in his little hand. Vocta had to crouch down a bit to be fully protected.

Na-Grujha laughed at the sight.

Then the Jawas occupied their free hands by producing mini-grenades from inside their flowing robe sleeves.

The Ipharian-Da'Lor choked off his laughter as Jik'Tal landed on Na-Grujha's back. The Jawa gripped the crimelord's spinal ridge with one small hand and placed a serrated vibroblade at Na-Grujha's throat.

Vocta straightened back up and cleared his throat loudly. "Ladies and gentlebeings. I'm sure we can devise a fair and equitable solution here... Preferably one in which my bar is not damaged beyond recognition and no one gets sent to his or her maker prematurely."

“And how do you propose that miracle take place?” Byeslee scoffed.

“Because it must. Or else...” Vocta produced a small hand-held device.

“Everybody dies.”

“What are you chuntering about, Anomid?” Na-Grujha hissed through bared fangs, though being extremely careful not to move his neck overly much.

“This is an EES device, a little acronym for ‘Emergency Evacuation System. For use when worse comes to worse and I surely think we’ve stumbled upon a situation that qualifies. If I press this tiny button here,” Vocta said, showing the crowd exactly what he meant, “every door and window in the club immediately seals over with four inches of transparisteel. Moments later, a hundred tiny vents release Chemtrox gas into the club, killing anyone exposed within seconds. The fumes are 100 percent lethal.”

“How in the galaxy does that allow anyone to escape?” Byeslee asked.

“You misunderstand. The EES is for me and me only.” Vocta eyes crinkled behind the vocalizer mask. “The Chemtrox doesn’t affect you if you’re not breathing it in...”

“You won’t get away with this,” the Commander said.

“I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Then let me open those crates and we’ll let the good citizens of Lianna decide that for themselves.”

“Be my guest.”

“Nice try, Vocta.” Byeslee once again addressed the crowd. “As you all may or may not be aware, baradium is notoriously unstable...”

“And if anyone was an expert on instability...” Vocta murmured, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Byeslee ignored him and the resulting snickers. “If unnecessarily jarred or exposed to excessive heat, the detonators could go off. Which is why I’ve brought along this thalivite incendiary.” He held up a thick block of white-yellow matter with a detonator switch stuck in the middle. “A relatively minor

explosion will release thaliv particles into the surrounding air, bonding with the baradium and rendering it inert for a short time.” The Commander offered his best triumphant stare to Vocta. “As always, my mind is one step ahead of everyone else’s.” He attached the device to one of the crates and then hurriedly stepped back, watching the countdown with undisguised glee. “Sometimes I amaze even myself.”

The crowd backed away a bit, many of the guests covering their auditory appendages.

Byeslee’s victory grin widened as a small explosion shook the repulsorlift sled. A barrage of choco-filling erupted within the blast area. Candy, cookie bits, and a few sprinkles showered the room. An industrial-sized dollop of frosting whip hurtled through the air and landed directly upon the Commander’s face with startling accuracy.

The Guard members tried to be helpful by prying open the remaining crates, however the only illicit item they discovered was a relatively amoral amount of foam custard.

Vocta blinked once. “I’ll let the irony speak for itself.” He held up the EES. “And now back to our mass destruction or hopefully, lack thereof.” The Anomid motioned to Broegan. “You and your men, *whoever you might be*, are leaving first. Have a nice day, don’t come back, and I expect a credit voucher for my ceiling.”

Broegan didn’t have to be told twice. He and his Rebel buddies hurried out.

The Commander finished wiping the frosting from his face and bellowed. “This is intolerable.”

“Let’s see. Which one of your offenses could you be referring to, Commander? Defamation of character, threats, false imprisonment, willful destruction of private assets... Need I go on?”

Byeslee’s mouth snapped shut.

Vocta turned to Solette. “As for our lovely ISB agent - sorry, I hope I didn’t just blow your cover - I think that any Imperial interests are no longer on the premises. So you should be finished trespassing on my property.”

Fuming, she spun on her stiletto heel and stormed away. Vocta leaned over to Tezz. "I hate to see her go, but I do enjoy watching her leave." He added, in a louder voice: "Don't forget your toy soldiers."

Solette motioned over her bare shoulder. The stormtroopers performed an about face and marched single-file out the front door.

"Which leaves nothing for the honored Liann Military Guard to do," Vocta said, "except arrest notorious crimelord, Itahn Na-Grujha..."

"What?"

"And since he's still wanted in about 20 star systems, whoever arrests him," the Anomid turned to Byeslee, "is bound to make all the galactic newsnets as quite a hero."

The Commander brightened a bit.

"Wouldn't surprise me at all if there was a medal to be had," Vocta added helpfully.

Byeslee's lips twitched, but he managed not to grin. Pulling a pair of magnacuffs from his belt, he personally took Na-Grujha into custody, after Jik'Tal was reluctantly convinced to climb off the crimelord's back. The rest of the Guard escorted the crimelord's three Gamorrean accomplices out of the club. Byeslee followed his men, with the angry Ipharian-Da'Lor as his prisoner.

When they passed Vocta, the Anomid whispered to Na-Grujha. "Nothing personal, Itahn. Just business."

Na-Grujha hissed back at Vocta, sputtering an extensive string of harsh Ipharian-Da'Lor curses that, luckily, no one could understand.

That left just Vocta and his bewildered guests. The Anomid took a deep breath and turned to face them.

The distinct sound of someone applauding echoed through the quiet room. Confused, Vocta looked to see who was making the noise. Sha'Dria was leaning out of her cooling station, clapping loudly. A few others soon joined in, then more, and there was even some whistling and cheering, until the whole crowd gave the Anomid a rousing ovation.

“The one thing Yin knows is how to put on a show.” Lady Valles emerged from the mass of beings and laid an approving hand on Vocta’s arm. “I can’t wait to see what you’ve got planned for next year.”

It was the first time in his life that the Anomid had been rendered utterly speechless.

Tezz quickly stepped in to cover his employer. “The boss is a bit choked up from your lovely approbation but I think what he’s trying to say is thank you all for coming. We’re glad you liked the entertainment and please enjoy the rest of the evening here at Bantha Traxx.”

Vocta nodded enthusiastically.

As the crowd slowly dispersed, Tezz sidled up to his boss and thought he overheard a distinct sigh of relief escape Vocta’s mask. Tezz said softly: “I’m curious. Exactly how did my mentioning the Death Star incite this plan?”

The Anomid finally found his voice. “Simple. Both endeavors had about one in a million chance of being successfully pulled off...”

“There’s still a few things I don’t understand though.”

“And what might those be, Tezz?”

“Why would the Alliance send a buffoon like Broegan on such an important mission?”

“Perhaps they were offering up a ceremonial gundark.”

Tezz was stunned. “You mean to draw attention away from an agent already in place...”

Vocta shrugged, taking in the club with a prolonged glance that lingered just a bit too long on Sha’Dria. “Anything’s possible.” He returned his attention to Tezz. “Other questions?”

“How in the dark heart of the Sith did you manage to sneak out the 250 real detonators?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow,” Vocta said simply and ever the consummate host, rejoined his party.

Sha'Dria finished reading 'The Littlest Bantha' to Miri for what must have been the thousandth time. The little girl never got tired of hearing that one. It was still quite early in the morning and the family-time room at Santhe House relatively quiet. Most of the children were asleep upstairs, dreaming of having real parents who would take care of them, and read them stories, and buy them gifts.

Miri and Sha'Dria were the only ones downstairs and thus the only ones who heard the soft door chime. They exchanged a look and the little one ran to answer it, opening the door before Sha'Dria could react.

There on the doorstep sat a small stuffed bantha with a big red bow around its neck. A tag tucked into its collar read 'FOR MIRI.' The girl was already squeezing it half to death, her eyes lit up like lumalamps on full glow. Sha'Dria hadn't seen Miri this happy in a long while.

Another tag spilled out of the beast's pouch and fluttered to the ground. Sha'Dria bent to pick it up and read, 'MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS ARE FOR EVERYBODY ELSE.' She took a cautious step outside and saw an enormous pile of stuffed banthas outside Santhe House.

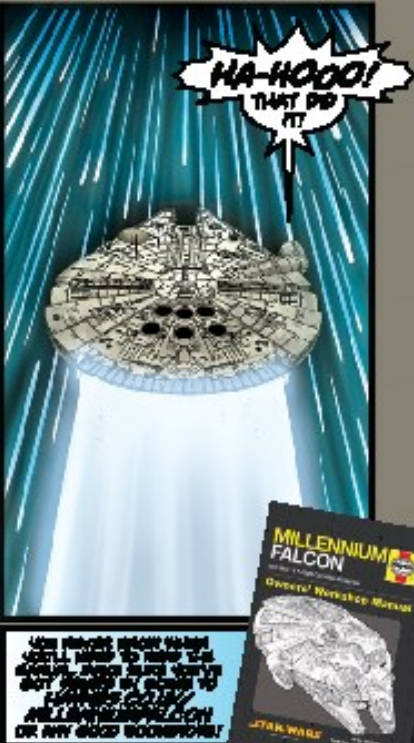
249 to be exact.

Sha'Dria took a plush bantha from the pile and checked its pouch, which had been distended slightly as if something heavy and round had recently been stored inside. She had a feeling that the rest of the dolls suffered from the same unusual condition.

Sha'Dria shook her head in amazement and couldn't help but grin as she walked back inside to awaken the other kids.



Haynes
The
Ultimate
Step-By-Step
Visual
Guide























Maze Run

It was the mother of all lightning storms.

Huge jets of relativistic plasma surged from the polar regions of the black hole, lighting up the dark with tendrils of shimmering fire. There was only one direction for a sane pilot to go: far away, as quickly as possible.

The Millennium Falcon gunned its engines and headed in.

Nor was this black hole an ordinary specimen.

Every galaxy rotates around a supermassive vortex, but this particular one was the hub of the dwarf galaxy known as the Rishi Maze. Vast fields of gravitation, energy, and debris stretched out on all sides. Perhaps that labyrinth of death was the reason the galaxy was called the Maze in the first place. Perhaps.

Han Solo didn't care.

What he cared about was angles and vectors and flight paths. As well as the fact that he'd been presented with a challenge of the first magnitude, for only the very best pilots stood a chance of getting through the Maze. That was what Solo cared about.

And payment. That, too.

The truly annoying part was that so far this undertaking had already cost him the highest price of all: a girl. While carousing at his favorite space bar back at Mos Eisley, he'd been that close to getting with that minx Jenny. They'd flirted and flitted around one another for months and he'd finally managed to peel her off from her throng of admirers, when the broker approached him. Norund Tac-fixture at the Merchants Guild and a longtime glitterstim smuggler-said he had a run that required a cool hand on the stick...somebody who could handle not just the Imperial Blockade of Hutt space but who could get through to the very center of the Rishi Maze. Tac was fronting for a group of spacers running an illegal energy farm deep in that maelstrom and who badly needed supplies of every kind: phase-loop generators, ramscoop coils, reserve shielding, the works. The Empire had the vertical space trade lane shut down, so the only way to reach the customers was via a run through the radiation fields

dangerously close to the galaxy's black hole. Which was all the more reason to drive a hard bargain-or else walk away entirely.

As it was, Han balked right up until the moment Tac laid half the payment on the table and promised a tidy little bonus at the delivery point. By the time they'd sealed the deal, Jenny had wandered off with Tork the Bouncer and another night of potential bliss went up in smoke. By the morning, Han and Chewie were aboard the Falcon and running from an Imperial cruiser hellbent on preventing them from jumping out of Hutt space. But giving the Imperials the slip was the Falcon's speciality and in the chase that followed, she more than lived up to her reputation...albeit with a few hits to the aft shielding.

Of course, that was the easy part. Now they had to thread the maze. Han watched while the Falcon's computer spat out the initial parameters of the run, calibrating a whole host of variables to plot the optimal way through the legion of obstacles. Han spread his gloved fingers over the holo-deck and began to shift the various indicators around for the tasks ahead.

He'd learned his lesson long ago: reconfigure the deck as needed and never get locked into anything. Flexibility was the key, and Han had made sure that the Falcon was the most flexible ship he'd ever piloted. To most, she was

just another beat-up old freighter, barely capable of carrying a load big enough to support her operations-but to Han she was better than having your own personal Star Destroyer. He'd put enough special tweaks and one-of-a-kind modifications into her to make the Falcon the match of any smuggling vessel on the Outer Rim.

On the screen, the radiation levels were climbing, and on the speakers so was the volume of Chewie's growls.

"Nothing to worry about," drawled Han.

Chewie's barbed retort resonated through the cockpit.

He was down in the access corridors, still running the posthyperflight checks. They'd hoped to have some time between exiting hyperspace and entering the Maze, but with Imperial ships in the vicinity, they'd had to forgo that luxury. But what Chewie wasn't forgoing was conducting the checks manually. He was a stickler for caution.

This was fine by Han. Given that he liked taking extra risks, he and the Wookiee balanced each other out. Great partnerships had been built on far less. Han grasped the stick and throttled the Falcon in, dodging past the photospheres of some of the stars caught in the black hole's outermost orbits. A few of those stars even had planets that the black hole had yet to tug loose from their grip: chunks of rock hewing close to their suns, any atmosphere long since swallowed by the maw that filled half the sky. Chewie's face appeared on the screen-he tossed back his head and growled to indicate that everything was checking out from the hyperspace jump and they could proceed as planned.

"Good," said Han, "because we already have." The Wookiee protested, but Han just kept talking over him: "I'm taking us in now; we can't waste any more time if we want to catch that directional beacon when it goes off." That had been its own argument, of course-Chewie wasn't too happy with the fact that they didn't even know the precise location of the rogue energy-farm, and that instead, the station would signal to them once they'd navigated enough of the Maze to be reachable on the comlinks. Even though Solo had replaced the Falcon's stock sensors with a military grade package years ago, finding the beacon amongst all the energy distortions would be no easy feat. He throttled the Falcon up to half speed and eased the ship into the gaps between the radiation fields. Those fields were shifting quickly enough that the Falcon's computer was working hard to plot the optimal flight vectors-and working overtime to factor out interference on the instrument readings.

Han gazed out of the cockpit as he eased between gigantic lakes of high-energy clouds. The ship shook as the gravitational forces increased-and then suddenly the radiation levels were spiking. Chewie's questioning growl reverberated through the com system. All Han could do was shrug agreement.

"Getting a little hot up here," he said, and put the Falcon into a slow roll, flipping the craft belly up to where her shields were at maximum. For a moment, the rad-readings held steady-and then they kept on climbing, reaching steadily toward the red, becoming intense enough that the cockpit was in growing jeopardy. Han let out a curse. Given the damage to the aft-shields, he'd expected this kind of development, just not so soon. If he stayed where he was, the radiation would boil him from the inside out. He flicked off the auto-pilot and proceeded to power down some of the ship's more fragile systems.

"Chewie, prep the engineering station. I gotta close up the cockpit."

Which took only another ten seconds. Han lowered the cockpit's blast shielding and proceeded to get the hell out of there, making for the auxiliary flight controls at the engineering station. Departing from the cockpit left a bad taste in his mouth because he'd have to fly the ship entirely by instruments and holo-display. He thought back to his flight training days and remembered how the words of his old instructor Aleksandr Badure and the infamous tactician Adar Tallon meshed.

When all else fails, you've always got your eyes.

But now he was blind. A light sweat broke out on his brow. It became just that little bit heavier as he reached the engineering station to be greeted by Chewbacca's mournful howl.

"What do you mean the navcom's out?" Solo stepped back, gave the casing a well placed kick, and was rewarded with the holo-screens flaring to life. "See? The old girl loves me." Ignoring Chewie's skeptical grumble, he keyed the 3D nav display's resolution to maximum. The astrogation displays centered on the black hole as they scrolled myriad data on the rising gravity and energy fields. Solo's fingers danced across the touch screens, making micro adjustments to the ship's course and speed while Chewie coaxed ever-greater performance levels from the engines. As always, the Falcon's navcom anticipated moves and fed course corrections as needed. The computer was so attuned to his piloting that Solo had long since come to regard it as a third crew member. Now that trust was paying off. For the next twenty minutes, man and machine and Wookiee ran the galaxy's most lethal gauntlet without incurring any further damage. As they emerged from another gap in the radiation fields, Solo resumed scanning for that beacon.

Only to find something else entirely.

The whole screen was alive with data. There were so many mass-signatures that for one crazy moment Solo thought they were in the middle of an asteroid field. And then the holo-display crystallized: he was looking at a massive cluster of debris caught in a gravitational pocket. Chewie's inquisitive rumble echoed up from the engine-room.

"Copy that," said Solo. "It's a ship's graveyard-" But even as he said that, he realized it wasn't quite true. Chills went up his spine as he realized what he really was looking at: not pieces of broken ships, but rather pieces of a single ship....a battlecruiser, thousands of meters long, its spine long snapped by the impact of the gravitational fields. Yet the ship's huge axe-shaped aft seemed to be mostly intact, blunt and menacing. Strangely, there didn't appear to be any listing of this type of vessel in the Falcon's records, though Solo had been assured that the last system update was the most comprehensive ship overview one could get on the black market.

It certainly wasn't any kind of craft Solo had ever encountered, and there were few ship designs he hadn't been exposed to during his time on the Outer Rim.

"You ever see a ship like that?" he asked Chewie as the Wookiee emerged from the ship's engine room wearing his welding goggles, a power-torch in one paw. Chewie leaned in and took a closer look-then let out a series of short barks.

"You really think it's that old?" Han frowned. "It's one hell of a piece of engineering, that's for sure. Some of its systems are still functioning...."

Han trailed off as the threat computer flashed on, displaying half a dozen contacts peeling out of the debris and moving in fast. He let out a low curse. His active scans had probably set them off. But they were too small to be fighters. Which meant...

"This ship's got some kind of automated defense system," he muttered. But Chewbacca had already put two and two together and was sprinting off to the quad laser. Solo throttled the ship into high-gear; as he tracked the incoming drones he realized that even a crack shot like Chewie would be hard-pressed to destroy them. Each drone radiated a shield much more powerful than any machine of that size ought to boast. He recalled another of his tutors' key rules: never mind the fancy maneuvers-just go straight at them! It wasn't like he had any other choice. He pulled the Falcon's nose up and punched it.

As he did so, the drones rolled into attack position and unleashed a withering barrage of blaster cannon fire at the Falcon. Solo felt the ship buckle as he spun the craft on its axis to present the rear shields to

his attackers. He heard the unmistakable sound of the Falcon's quad lasers answering back. As Chewie scored a direct hit, blowing one target to pieces,

the remaining pods broke off and angled for another line of attack against the Falcon's weakened front shielding. They were going to bring him down through sheer numbers, Solo realized. Like wolf cats harrying prey. But even as he braced himself, the holodisplay caught his attention with more data. The computer had decoded the transmissions among the defense drones.

And between those drones and the derelict ship.

Solo swore under his breath. The ancient starship's power plant and main engine systems were still active! The sensors showed the bright lines of microwave energy flowing from the starship, powering the drones. The computer was busy trying to disable those energy signals, but wasn't making any headway. Still...a crazy idea came into Solo's head. So crazy he didn't even dare tell Chewie. He patted the Falcon's nav-computer like a beloved pet.

"Don't let me down, baby" - and then he turned the Falcon sharply, sent it hurtling past the huge ship. The drones turned to pursue him while the Falcon's computer went into overdrive, its signals wending their way ever deeper into the starship's systems, searching for the behemoth's engines. As the Falcon shot past the huge craft's rear, the drones opened fire at a range that was all too close; Han's chair shook as the Falcon's shields went into the red. He heard Chewie's howls of anger sounding from the quad-laser turret. But as the drones closed in for the kill, the Falcon's computer found what it was looking for...

"Do it," Han said through gritted teeth.

...and ordered the giant starship's engines to ignite a full burn. White heat surged across the pursuing drones, detonating them in a series of flashes. Next moment, the burn ceased, the long-derelict reactor exhausted. All that was left of the drones was more debris. The momentum of the starship's engine-block carried it forward into the next piece of wreckage, which in turn slammed against the forward section. A nasty chain reaction was underway, but Han wasn't waiting around-he punched the Falcon's afterburners and roared out of the gravity pocket, back into the fields of energy. They were moving much faster now with the boost. That black hole was getting closer with every moment, a backdrop against all the stars and radiation, the hub around which it was all turning.

And then Solo heard a loud beeping.

At first he thought it was another of those drones.

But Chewie's yell of triumph said otherwise-

"Pay-dirt," yelled Solo. They'd found the beacon. Its syncopated rhythm echoed through the corridors of the Falcon as the computer ran extrapolations back to its source: a rock orbiting a star that in turn was orbiting less than 1.5 tera meters from the event horizon of the black hole. The energy readings indicated a substantial base there-easily large enough to harness energy from the black hole that stretched over it like some kind of demented sun. Solo let out a sigh of relief-and stopped as the base's defense weaponry locked onto the Falcon. The comlink began flashing.

A disembodied voice reverberated through the cockpit.

"Unidentified vessel, identify yourself."

Solo took a deep breath. "Epsilon zero-five-six-eight-Z," he said. The code phrase he'd been given back at Mos Eisley, the sequence upon which this entire mission depended....

"Affirmative," said the voice. "This is Firebase Alpha. We read you, Falcon. How was your trip?"

A grin spread over Solo's face. "Just fine, Alpha. No problems." His voice took on a sardonic tone. "Apart from Imperial starships on the way in and some kind of halfdead starship in the middle of the Maze."

"Sounds like you met our Sith relic," said the voice.

"Your what?"

"Most of the routes skirt the wreckage. Sorry you got the one that didn't."

"You and me both," muttered Solo.

"Well...congratulations on keeping your hide intact.

We're clearing you for landing on approach vector 1.3 Zeta."

"Roger that, Alpha," said Solo. "Think you could have a couple of a glasses of T'lil T'lil ready for us?"

The voice chuckled. "We'll see what we can do Alpha-over and out." As Han switched off the comlink, Chewie's rumbling baritone sounded over the ship's speakers. Han frowned.

"What do you mean power surge?" Han scanned the internal sensors and saw that the forward cargo was indeed showing a weird energy reading. It looked like it might be some kind of feedback from the just-received beacon-an echo in the system. But even as Solo suggested this to Chewie, the Wookiee cut him off, grunting that he was heading forward to the hold.

"Oh for the love of..." Solo activated the autopilot and raced to the forward holds to find Chewie already inside, pointing a hand scanner at one of the huge oblong crates that constituted the Falcon's cargo. Solo's eyes went wide.

"It's coming from inside that box?" he asked.

The Wookiee nodded. Han was getting a sinking feeling about this. He grabbed a charged pry-bar and unceremoniously popped the cargo container's magnetic seal, revealing a two-meter long canister covered in what looked like Imperial markings. At the top of the canister was a device that could only be a detonator. And as for the canister itself_____

Han snatched the hand scanner from his friend's gigantic paw and shoved the device up close. The result flashed onscreen:

"Baradium," he said.

Chewie snarled with anger. The scanner rattled off more specs, but Han didn't need to read any of them.

He'd spent enough time as an Imperial cadet to know all about baradium and the disintegrating wave its fusion reaction unleashed.

And there was enough here to fracture a small moon.

Solo slammed his fist against the bulkhead. It all fell into place like getting dealt the perfect hand in a rigged card game. There was only one type of man insane enough to hide on the lip of a black hole mining energy:

Kriffin' Rebels. And what better way to wipe them out then to send in a couple of dupes

unwittingly carrying a bomb on a supply run? Chalk one up to the Imperials' department of dirty tricks. The hand scanner told him the rest of the story: the beacon's signal must have inadvertently played havoc with the bomb's electronic detonator, activating it prematurely. Undoubtedly, the plan had been for it to go off when the Falcon reached the base. Now it was on a countdown. But how much time did they have?

There was a beeping noise on the speakers.

"Thirty seconds until touchdown," said the autopilot.

Han and Chewie started moving at the same instant, scrambling to close the bomb in its container and get out of the hold. As Chewie sealed the compartment, Han activated the sequence to vent the outer hatch and dump the cargo into space.

But Chewie's next growl turned Solo's blood to ice.

"What do you mean the doors won't open?" Han pushed Chewie out of the way and frantically hit the override button. The hatch still refused to cycle. Apparently, the controls to the hold had been damaged- whether by radiation or by hits from the drones or the Star Destroyer no longer mattered. Chewie was already racing back to the cockpit, and Han dashed after him.

He found the Wookiee trying every possible sequence and combination to get the hatch open. Out the window the massive superstructures of the base rose from the darkness as the Falcon made its final approach...

"Chewie, get us the hell out of here." Chewie slid into his acceleration chair and turned off the auto pilot. The ship bucked and jumped as Chewie shut down the landing approach and spun the Falcon away from the base. The speakers crackled.

"Alpha to Falcon, you're off the approach course. What's going on? I repeat..."

"Falcon to Alpha, we're having a little bit of problem. Over." Han shut down the com and made for the door. Chewie's quizzical grunt stopped him for a second.

"What do you think I'm going to do? Somebody's got to get that cargo hatch open. And if we can't do it from the inside-"

Chewie's eyes widened as he realized what Han was saying.

"This will be easier than selling water to dirt farmers on Tatooine."

The Wookiee let out an ear-shattering roar. Han looked his friend in the eyes and smiled the smile that would one day be known across the galaxy.

"Trust me."

Chewie's mournful wail followed Solo all the way to the equipment locker. Han retrieved the old military surplus spacesuit, then jogged to the central hatch access and proceeded to strap it on. The ship shuddered and the walls shook as Chewie continued to veer away from the approach vector, struggling against the gravity of the black hole. Han engaged the hydraulic lift and felt its reverberation under his feet as he rose toward the ceiling and went through his checklist: magnetic boots engaged, blast visor down, helmet sealed. He took a deep breath.

"Get it together, Solo," he muttered, "or this is going to be a short walk."

And then the dorsal hatch slid open above him and he was out in the vacuum. The black hole filled most of the sky, impossibly huge and menacing. Off to one side was Firebase Alpha, structures clustering over that rock-and now he could see the giant energy siphons stretching down toward the black hole, crackling with enough energy to fuel a thousand warships....

Han took in the view in an instant, and then he forced himself to look only at the Falcon as he made his way across her surface. He felt the hull rumble beneath him as Chewie fought the black hole's pull to buy Han time to get to the manual hatch controls. But the readouts in Han's helmet showed him he wasn't going fast enough. That bomb was going to detonate before he could

get it away from the Falcon. He wasn't going to make it. Unless he did the one thing he'd always been best at.

Cutting corners.

Solo turned off his mag boots and fired a quick blast from his suit's thrusters. The ship's hull passed rapidly underneath him as he honed in on the cargo hatch. At the last minute, he re-activated his boots and managed to catch himself a meter away from the cargo doors before reaching for the first of the external locks and pulling with all of his might. To his relief, the lock slotted into its open position. As his hands closed on the second and final lock, the ship's hull surged beneath his feet like a living thing. He held on as the Falcon accelerated in-straight toward the black hole. Han nodded. Chewie had started his run. Now Han had to do his part. He pulled against the last lock.

It wouldn't budge.

He shifted, positioning himself so he could use both hands. But just as he started to apply the pressure, the ship shook so violently it felt like it was breaking apart.

In fact, several pieces of the landing gear ripped free and flew toward him like shrapnel. Han went flat against the hull as the metal shards skipped past him-except for one, which struck him a glancing blow on his rear-pack. He opened his eyes to see the suit's power meter draining rapidly to zero. Damn. He pulled himself back to his feet, grabbed the controls of the door with both hands and pulled. The lever came loose and the hold door opened as the light went green. Even as Solo's suit's energy was going into the red....

Suddenly, he was floating off the hull-no power to his boots. The maw of the black hole was drawing him inexorably in. As he spun through the darkness, he saw the Falcon hurtle away-and then suddenly flip, its nose coming up hard as the contents of the hold shot out. The Falcon turned away from the black hole as the jettisoned containers reached its edge, the bomb exploding even as they did so, all the light and energy from the massive blast pulled across the event horizon in a single instant and vanishing into darkness.

Han smiled.

It was getting hard to breathe.

At least Chewie had made it. He wondered if he'd get to that event horizon before he ran out of air. He hoped so.

It would be one hell of a way to go.

But then he saw another light reflected in his visor- the bright flash of the Falcon's engines. Chewie had turned the ship around and was bringing her back toward Solo, coming in at an angle so as not to veer across that deadly horizon, spinning like a top to increase momentum and maneuverability. For a moment it looked like the Falcon, would smash right into Solo.... But at the last moment, the ship stopped its spinning and activated its tractor beam, pulling Solo directly toward the still-open cargo doors. Solo curled into a ball as he shot through. And then the exterior doors sealed.

The interior doors opened. Han pulled off his helmet as the Falcon accelerated away. He couldn't stop laughing. He'd always thought he was an amazing pilot, but once again his Wookiee partner had shown there was more to him than met the eye. Han was still laughing as an anxious Chewbacca ran into the room, scooping Solo up in a Wookiee hug.

"It's all right pal. I'm all right-thanks to you."

Chewie put him down, but still held the somewhat woozy Solo upright. Solo stepped back, stretched.

"So....I guess after we drop off what's left of the cargo, we go back and have a word or two with Tac. How does that sound?"

Chewie's barking laughter echoed through the ship.

Recovered Messages From *The Purge*

NOTE: The following messages were recovered from the Imperial Prison Barge *Purge*, after its discovery in the Unknown Regions.

With the exception of certain elements that have been redacted upon the request of specific parties or individuals, these letters and notations are

presented here unedited, with their original spelling and syntax intact, in the interest of galactic scholarship.

Letter from Dr. Zahara Cody, Chief Medical Officer, to her father, Teef Lan Cody:

Dear Dad:

I'm writing to you instead of Mother because I hope you'll understand what I'm about to say in the context that it's intended. I've given a lot of thought to what you said and I've reluctantly come to the conclusion that you're right.

Consequently I'm resigning my post here after this mission is complete and will be coming back to (REDACTED) to take my place in the (REDACTED) organization.

I certainly don't regret the choices that brought me this far. Working for Imperial Corrections, I've gained invaluable life experiences and learned more about myself than I'd ever imagined. But events have unfolded here aboard the *Purge* in the past few weeks that have forced me to reevaluate my priorities.

So I will see you and Mom soon. I hope to be back aboard a transport headed to the Core Worlds by next week's end. It may take a bit longer. There's something wrong with our engines. But I'm sure it will be fixed soon enough.

Love,
Zahara

From Nox Xakarta (Inmate ICN 148901) to Illegible Recipient:

To (illegible):

Whats up my brother??? You'll never guess where I am!!! Yes they FINALLY caught me!!! It is the big time now for me you bet. People will (illegible) now that's for sure. Remember I always sad: Nox Xakarta will be famos yet. Right now we are in a Prison Barge but it is broken down (HA!) somewhere who knows where!!! Crazy right!!

Well get this! Now we have been in LOCKDOWN now for five hole Hours and I have not seen a Single Guard for that hole time. Mybe they gave up!

Come to think of it we shud have gone to the Mess by now.

I am sure Hungry.

And plus also my cellmate is (illegible) in his bunk. I think he is Sick or something.

Ill be fine though. I always was lucky.

NX

Letter from Armo Drane (Inmate ICN-20020) to his wife Tso Sook Drane:

Dear Tso:

Well, it's morning again. Plenty of time to write and think. The guards say that we are still six days out from our detention moon but I don't know if I believe them. Seems like we've already been gone a long time. The food here isn't as bad as I thought. I keep to myself and try to keep my head down. A guard named Wembly said he'd try to get this letter back to you and so I hope he does.

Someday I hope I can get a chance to explain what I did. If it makes things easier for you and Jollar it was worth it. Meanwhile I hope this letter reaches you in good health and the farm is not giving you too much trouble.

Your loving,

Arno

PS: Don't forget to check the humidity sensor on the water vaporator on the south quadrant. You know how it gets bound up.

PPS: If Moy-Ran Bostt comes by again and tells you we still owe him back pay for last season, you send him packing. He is a piker and he was already paid once for that harvest.

Found written on the wall of the Purge's mess hall:

WARDEN KLOTH EATS IT

Important Message From The Imperial Corrections Service

Posted by [Jay](#) on September 10, 2009 at 03:00 PM CST:

From Bissley Kloth, Warden, to Sgt. Hazar Yupcavage, Regional Director, Imperial Corrections Service:

Dear Sir:

I'm writing to inform you to the best of my abilities of the regrettable circumstances recently besetting the Imperial Barge *Purge*.

These are the facts. At 0945 this morning, our main engine thrusters became nonfunctional. We were able to dispatch a maintenance crew to a derelict Star Destroyer for replacement parts, and initially the mission seemed like it was a success.

What happened next was less clear. It appears as though the engineering crew may have been exposed to some type of infectious process. When questioned in medbay, the only thing that any of them were able to tell us is the word Blackwing. Database searches under this word yield no results except for one arcane reference to [REDACTED] in the [REDACTED].

In the interest of maintaining order I have followed standard operation procedure and quarantined the non-infected crew and myself in the appropriate facilities. We have sent distress signals to any and all nearby Imperial craft and have no intention of evacuating the barge unless it is absolutely necessary.

Thank you in advance for your understanding,

Warden Bissley Kloth

Dear Dad:

Pretty weird writing to a dead person, right? Except it doesn't feel any weirder than any of the other stuff that's been happening lately.

Our detention level has been in lockdown for several hours now with no explanation from the powers that be. I don't think anybody knows what's going on. The barge broke down sometime this afternoon. Wembly slipped by to tell us they found a derelict Star Destroyer and sent a crew up to scavenge parts but that's the last I've heard about it. I can tell Trig is really scared and I'm trying to think of all the things that you'd do to make him feel better but it's not helping. I keep thinking if you were still here, it would be okay.

I know you always said not to have any regrets, but I wish I had been with you in the medbay that last time. I tried to get Trig to talk about what happened but you know how he is about stuff like that, Mr. Keep to Myself.

A guard just went running past our cell in an isolation suit. It was torn open around the mask and it looked like he was bleeding. I wish I knew more about what was happening.

I hope

(unfinished, unsigned)

From Trig Longo (Inmate ICN-299282) to Gilles Longo:

Hey Dad:

I just found this letter that Kale was writing to you. He is asleep right now and doesn't know I found it under the mattress. But there was a little space left at the bottom to write this.

I think we're the only ones left.

For a long time everybody was yelling, "Let us out so we at least have a chance," stuff like that. The Rodians in the cell across from ours died. Then the rest of them did too. Now it's so quiet. I can smell the bodies locked up around us. They're starting to rot.

There are no guards left either.

I don't know why we didn't get sick. Whatever it is Kale and I must be immune to it. If no one comes to let us out we'll starve to death in here. I'm not hungry but I am thirsty and I don't want to die in here

Running out of room.

Wait.

I think I just heard something on the other side of the hall.

It sounds like footsteps heading this way.

Maybe we'll be all right after all

I think someone's coming.

From Dr. Cody to her father:

Dear Dad:

I don't have much time but I wanted to get this down while I had a chance. Things here have changed dramatically. In the last two hours my medbay has been overrun with sick inmates, guards and troopers, many of whom have already died while in my care. My medical droid and I have no idea what type of infection we're dealing with, only that it's extremely aggressive and traditional treatment seems completely ineffective.

Worse, our isolation and quarantine countermeasures have no effect. Although I haven't found any sign of contamination in myself yet, I can't help but think it may be inevitable.

There is sickness and despair everywhere, confusion and complete breakdown of order on every level. I just saw a stormtrooper in the hallway take off his helmet and put his blaster to his head. He was crying when he did it.

Even now I don't regret what I've done here and continue to try my best to help. I will try to write again if I get the chance but now must go.

Letter from Dugtroy Osck (Inmate ICN-001198), AKA, Dugtroy the Header, AKA Dugtroy the Cruel, to Boffitt Einer, known associate:

Hello Einer:

Remember me? I hope so. You probably think I'm not your problem anymore. Double-crossing me on that spice run must have seemed like a great idea at the time. Rat me out to the Imperials, keep the shipment and the payday, and I'm out of your hair forever, right?

Bad news, Einer. That shipment wasn't mine. It was a run for a Hutt clan, but I'm not going to tell you which one. Congratulations, you just stole from the most vicious crime syndicate in the galaxy.

You picked the wrong mark this time, nerf . There's not a fixer out there that can square things for you now. I might be spending the rest of my life rotting away on a miserable detention moon, but I'm going to be sitting back smiling as I think of all the things the Hutts are going to do to you before they finally let you die.

(signed)

D.O.

From Purge flight deck autoresponse system, Error Message 156, 2110 hours:

Current inmate census unobtainable.

Current life-form calibration readings insufficient for census.

Please recalibrate life-form biorhythm criteria...

Found on the wall of the Purge's sickbay:

THIS ISH! EVERYBODY DIES!

From Imperial Corrections Officer Omar Zook, to his wife Kai Zook, Hanna City, Chandrilla:

Dear Kai:

I know I told you and the kids I would be home after this run. But that is not going to happen. I am sorry to say that something has gone wrong on the barge. Everybody is getting sick and nobody knows why. At first they said to

keep quiet about it but now it doesn't seem to matter. Almost everybody has died so far. At first I thought I was going to be okay but now it looks like I have it too.

I am sorry, Kai. I know this is going to be hard on the boys. Will you please tell them their daddy loves them? I am so sorry this is how things turned out, but tell them I served to the best of my abilities and I was not a coward and never scared.

And I love you with all my heart.

(signed)

This Is TK-329

This is TK 329 of the Imperial Army, broadcasting from the Star Destroyer, Vector.

The Empire has supplied some of us with these new communication tools to better spread the word about our mission. 7:02 AM Sep 14th, 2009 via web

Hopefully I can make people understand what we do and inspire others to serve the Empire's noble cause 6:19 PM Sep 14th, 2009 via web

I graduated from the Academy 3 years ago and have served on the Vector ever since. It's hard to be away from family but we do get leave time 6:27 AM Sep 15th, 2009 via web

My wife and son realize that what I do, I do for the good of the galaxy and to help maintain peace for all its citizens. 5:50 PM Sep 15th, 2009 via web

Signing up with the Imperial forces allows for the potential of a great career in a number of fields 4:53 PM Sep 16th, 2009 via web

Ultimately I hope to finish up my service in a couple years and move to the Emperor's private security detail as one of his Royal Guards. 4:53 PM Sep 16th, 2009 via web

Of course I would want my son to follow in my footsteps. Nothing would make me more proud. Answering the call to service is a noble endeavor 7:02 AM Sep 17th, 2009 via web

As one of our instructors often stated, beginning very early on in the Academy: Our credo is Service. Fealty. Fidelity. We live these words. 3:18 PM Sep 17th, 2009 via web

Even if one doesn't meet the physical or age requirements to serve as a stormtrooper, the Empire may yet have use for you. 8:46 AM Sep 18th, 2009 via web

It's the duty of every citizen to register with one of our recruiting agents and help make the galaxy safe for future generations 8:47 AM Sep 18th, 2009 via web

I finished top of my class from the Academy of Carida. Raithal gets the accolades but I would gladly challenge any of their graduates. 5:32 AM Sep 19th, 2009 via web

Personally I think we are better than the clones. The rest of us have had to fight and train our whole lives for the opportunity to serve 1:37 PM Sep 20th, 2009 via web

My colleague Davin is also a good friend. My closest. We trained together at the Academy but he was ultimately stationed elsewhere. 5:04 PM Sep 20th, 2009 via web

My group is under the leadership of Commander Tallos, but we often coordinate training activities with Commander Gorrister and his squad. 8:16 AM Sep 21st, 2009 via web

Gorrister is regarded by the Moffs as a great leader; one who will do anything to ensure the safety of his men and the success of a mission 6:28 PM Sep 21st, 2009 via web

It's on board the Vector that I truly get a sense of what our great Empire is capable of. This ship is truly a marvel of engineering. 7:19 AM Sep 22nd, 2009 via web

The Grand Moff himself has personally toured this ship and we passed inspection with flying colors 2:30 PM Sep 22nd, 2009 via web

I don't think one can understand just how large these vessels are until you're forced to run the length of the halls during morning drills. 7:06 PM Sep 22nd, 2009 via web

There isn't much we can do with the limited amount of free time available. Many of us have become pretty good Dejarik and Sabaac players. 5:52 AM Sep 23rd, 2009 via web

The armor isn't as uncomfortable as people think. Besides, it's designed to keep us alive in a fight, and I'd choose safety over comfort 11:25 AM Sep 23rd, 2009 via web

Our body armor isn't able to withstand direct blaster shots, but it is designed to survive the most extreme conditions 3:50 PM Sep 23rd, 2009 via web

Ha, the BlasTech E-11. It gets a bad reputation for lack of accuracy but it's one of the most powerful blaster rifles on the market 5:47 AM Sep 24th, 2009 via web

A good soldier will compensate for any accuracy issues and make necessary adjustments. Blaming the weapon for one's failures is foolish 7:01 AM Sep 24th, 2009 via web

@Darth_Duff You should choose your words carefully. Talk like that could get you in trouble. 7:43 AM Sep 24th, 2009 via web

I've encountered the Rebels on many occasions. The first encounter was during a peacekeeping mission on Ryloth where they ambushed my squad. 5:40 AM Sep 25th, 2009 via web

The Rebel way is one of cowardice and selfishness. They will not rest until the galaxy is torn apart in civil unrest 7:27 AM Sep 25th, 2009 via web

@troopfan This job isn't for the faint of heart but the rewards are far greater than you can imagine 11:51 AM Sep 25th, 2009 via web

I've killed my share of Rebels but they multiply like bacteria, each new wave more cunning and ruthless than the last 7:36 AM Sep 26th, 2009 via web

There are constant rumors of Jedi survivors scattered throughout the galaxy, being given sanctuary by sympathizers to their cause. 7:42 AM Sep 27th, 2009 via web

Make no mistake, any surviving Jedi will be brought to justice soon. And those found harboring Jedi will face dire consequences. 8:03 AM Sep 27th, 2009 via web

A fight broke out in the mess hall this afternoon. Really, the slop served aboard these ships isn't worth the disciplinary action 5:50 AM Sep 28th, 2009 via web

3 straight weeks aboard the ship can lead to breakdowns in discipline, but 90 days in the brig will change a trooper's attitude. 2:12 PM Sep 28th, 2009 via web

Gareth. I can't wait to see you and mommy again soon. We'll have a big party just for you when I come home 7:10 AM Sep 29th, 2009 via web

One of the hardest adjustments is learning how to sleep with so much noise around you. The Vector sounds like it's alive at times. 8:09 AM Sep 30th, 2009 via web

It's been a very long time but daddy should be home to visit you both soon. I picked you up something very special.. 10:06 AM Sep 29th, 2009 via web

Our living quarters are small but comfortable. We don't tend to spend much time in them anyway, except to sleep 5:38 AM Oct 1st, 2009 via web

@Bly5052 I stand by the choices I've made, can you say the same? 5:45 AM Oct 1st, 2009 via web

We're usually in training exercises, spending the day in mission briefings or performing assigned duties on the ship 11:28 AM Oct 1st, 2009 via web

Life on the Vector can sometimes be monotonous, which is why most of us crave the action that comes with the job 8:17 PM Oct 1st, 2009 via web

The real fun begins when an emergency occurs. Procedure goes out the window and we're just running on instinct and training. 6:02 AM Oct 2nd, 2009 via web

Almost everyone has a Vader story. You can judge if it's a good one by whether or not the person is alive to tell it. 3:04 PM Oct 3rd, 2009 via web

I did a brief tour on one of the prison barges. Those who want to serve on the front lines need to do time with lesser security details. 5:22 PM Oct 3rd, 2009 via web

As I stormtrooper, I patrol the galaxy, shaking out wretched hives of scum, villainy and enemies of the Empire. Enemies of peace and order. 4:44 PM Oct 4th, 2009 via web

We've all lost people close to us during the war: friends, brothers, parents and children. But it be at an end once we eliminate the Rebels. 5:23 PM Oct 4th, 2009 via web

The 501st? To serve in the 501st is to serve with the best the Empire has to offer. One should be so lucky 5:05 PM Oct 5th, 2009 via web

Had a brief stopover near Meglumine. Only a small team went planet-side but the rest of us were able to enjoy some R&R 5:59 PM Oct 5th, 2009 via web

It's unusual for such a small team to be deployed but sometimes maintaining secrecy is more important than having strength in numbers 6:41 AM Oct 6th, 2009 via web

Heads are going to roll today. Word around the ship is that a few troops mishandled the special cargo and some of it was contaminated. 8:47 AM Oct 6th, 2009 via web

It's general chaos today. Whatever cargo was damaged the other day has upset all the wrong people. 9:30 AM Oct 7th, 2009 via web

Now we're having problems with the ship's power. The engines have been stalling and we've switched to backups twice in the last 3 days 8:12 AM Oct 7th, 2009 via web

It could be the power issues but a lot more men are taking to the sick bays recently. It's like they've all suddenly caught the same illness 8:53 AM Oct 8th, 2009 via web

The engines have completely stalled now and our communications are malfunctioning. I don't even know if these messages will be received. 12:15 PM Oct 8th, 2009 via web

The infection appears worse than anyone thought. Training sessions were canceled today because most of the men were too sick to show up 6:10 AM Oct 9th, 2009 via web

Worse than getting used to the noise of a Star Destroyer is the suddenness of complete silence, other than the weakened voices of the crew 9:16 AM Oct 9th, 2009 via web

Visited the infirmary today to get myself checked out and saw that the earliest victims of the illness did not make it. 8:24 AM Oct 10th, 2009 via web

The death toll numbers in the hundreds. Men who were vital and active days ago reduced to decrepit corpses. Their skin ashen and bloodied 5:03 PM Oct 10th, 2009 via web

The effects of this illness are horrific. 8:06 PM Oct 11th, 2009 via web

We've completely lost power and we're relying on back up generators for the most minimal life support functions 8:07 PM Oct 11th, 2009 via web

Some of the healthier troopers remaining have been talking of making an escape attempt 5:29 AM Oct 12th, 2009 via web

Death is all around us. What is happening to us!?! The halls are stained with blood and the smell of decay fills the air. 8:18 AM Oct 12th, 2009 via web

I don't feel sick yet but the symptoms strike without warning and the effects are almost instantaneous. Is no one out there listening? 1:03 PM Oct 12th, 2009 via web

Gareth, take care of your mother. Mera, I love you. I'm sorry 5:28 PM Oct 12th, 2009 via web

Gorrister and his team are planning to escape. I'm going to go with them. It's the only hope we have at surviving this plague. 5:27 AM Oct 13th, 2009 via web

I can feel the death coursing through my body. It wonnnnt b lonng now. 7:36 AM Oct 13th, 2009 via web

The dead. They .. 8:57 AM Oct 13th, 2009 via web

Gundark's Fantastic Technology

To: Commander Drev Prilarca, NRSF Arms Interdiction Task Force

From: Major Shepprd Barron, CorSec (retired)

RE: "Gundark" Arms Ring

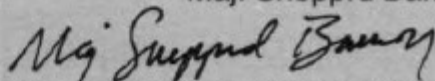
Commander:

As per your request (datapad ref. 92847/98234), I have managed to retrieve files from the CorSec criminal database regarding the individual who operates under the alias "Gundark"—his dossier is attached to this transmission.

I have also acquired a copy of the illegal database that "Gundark" maintains, apparently as a sort of catalog. This catalog is encrypted and covertly inserted into local HoloNet carrier signals, particularly any governmental or law enforcement bandwidths; apparently "Gundark" has a keen sense of irony.

Regards,

Maj. Shepprd Barron



Major Shepprd Barron, CorSec (retired)

Gundark's Gear Datalog

Gather round, grubbers: Gundark's back! It's been a while since I put out a datalog for you "esteemed" customers and some of you have been hounding me to update the inventory scandoc. So here's the latest Gear Datalog.

Now remember, I wouldn't be talking about these items if I didn't have samples of them in my possession, so look through the datalog and make up your wish list. When you know what you want in your greedy little hands, come find Gundark. (Contacts can be arranged via the HoloNet; match bandwidth with the carrier wave that brought you the Gear Datalog and I'll be in touch.)

The Tatooine Bureau of Travel and Commerce Presents

Enjoy the spectacle of an interstellar voyage
without the expense, *and* without ever having to leave home ...

The Cruise of a Lifetime!

The Lucky Despot is your ticket to a fantastic weekend getaway. Permanently "moored" among the picturesque buildings of the oldest part of Mos Eisley (complete with on-site security), the Despot is an authentic decommissioned starship transformed into a fabulous dune-side hotel resort. Enjoy a starfaring voyage in home port — safely and in the greatest comfort — aboard the fabled Lucky Despot.

- The exotic Star Chamber café features a unique starfield projector. Designed to recreate the galaxy in all its majesty and wonder, the holographic display projects a portion of the cosmos as seen from Imperial System! See planets and moons revolve in full color, at speeds of up to fifty times their normal orbits. Watch holographic comets fly right into your soup!

- Visit our gift shop and pick up holocube mementos of your "journey": the Lucky Despot stocks holocubes from most major cruise lines. Let your friends think you were aboard the Kuari Princess.

- The rumble of the hotel's food and water processing plant helps sustain the illusion of a ship's engine: you can actually envision yourself cruising effortlessly through the galaxy on a luxury yacht. All the excitement of a shipboard cruise for one-tenth the cost of those chartered "Galaxy Tours."*

- Experience an authentic ship's stateroom. Each cabin is part of the original craft or was purchased from decommissioned "luxury" cruisers. The close quarters that early settlers might have experienced have been painstakingly maintained to make your stay as true as possible.

- Instead of endless sandy vistas, many of the ship's viewports have been transformed into aquariums, containing exotic fish from a score of alien worlds, while other viewports are now exciting terrariums — each hosting an unusual example of native Tatooine wildlife. Few residents have actually seen a bone-grawer or gravel-maggot this close!



This season, the Lucky Despot is proud to present an exclusive engagement of the remarkable acoustics of SySnootles and the Max Rebo Band. Fresh off a multi-sector tour, they have returned to the lovely Despot for your entertainment. Their sound has been described as "the most original interpretation of a Sinfonia concertante I have yet to experience."

There's a luxury stateroom waiting for you!

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First Impressions

The speeder inched its way slowly along the crooked streets. Dozens of disreputable-looking beings meandered through the maze, oblivious to the shiny speeder with the Imperial emblem. The place was hot, the buildings huddled close to the ground. Every so often a narrow alley offered shadows strung along its length, but the twin suns made sure that the shadows provided no relief from the heat. Or the smell.

"It's not much to look at, is it?" sighed Prefect Eugene Talmont, tugging open the collar of his uniform.

Lieutenant Harburik looked up from the instrument panel. "No, sir." The soldier quickly weaved around a cluster of Jawas. The brown-cloaked creatures scuttled alongside the speeder for a few meters, stroking the hood and jabbering at each other. The Prefect noticed a few flies buzzing about the hoods of the short creatures and instinctively recoiled. He turned around to watch them as the speeder eventually outpaced them and the small beings receded into the distance.

"Hmph. If this is the greatest settlement on the planet, I'd say that my stationing here will be a waste of my considerable talent. You'd think old Moff Julstan could find someplace more deserving of my skills as a negotiator: my learned finesse."

"Yes, sir. It's true that nothing much happens here." Harburik had met the man only five minutes ago and already detested him. He decided to let the Prefect find out for himself just how much activity was seething under the surface of this docile-looking city. Perhaps that would learn some of the smugness out of him.

"By the way, what do you know about why the old Prefect was removed from his post? I had heard of his general incompetence and idiosyncrasies — imagine wasting Imperial revenue on producing thousands of local maps to hand out free to visitors — but loosing general incompetence onto this backwater planet seems harmless enough."

"Prefect Depp was killed in the line of action, sir."

"On this planet?" Prefect Talmont shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Surely not a local uprising?"

"The report was a little vague, sir," Harburik said, in his most infuriating drawl, enjoying the Prefect's discomfort. "Something about an assassin Droid, as I recall."

"Oh. Oh ... my." Talmont blanched and sat back. "Shall we put the canopy roof up? Yes, the canopy, I think. We had better review the current police deployment once we reach my office. Oh, my."

The lieutenant smiled as he directed the speeder toward the Prefect's new office.

A SPACER'S LIFE— BoSS AND THE ImPeRe

From a conversation with Platt Okeefe over Elba beers on Kwenn Space Station, 1 BBY.

So you want to be a starhopper? First thing to know, kid: All that empty space between the stars isn't empty. It's filled with rules and regulations designed to make sure you're qualified to fly your bird, it's spaceworthy, and whatever weapons you've got are for defensive purposes, as well as to explain what you can and can't do in terms of trading goods and flying with systems.

If you're a starhopper, you'll have to pay attention to all these regs. If you're a smuggler . . . well, that's different.

The agency in charge of space travel is the Imperial Space Ministry, a branch of the navy. The ministry constantly reviews the *Imperial Spacefaring Regulations*, updating rules and making new ones. Renew your flight certification and you'll automatically get these updates in the *Spacers' Information Manual*. The ministry also handles spaceport certifications and inspections and updates astrognational information—everything from updated charts and routes to new mappings. Unless you like flying into a newly charted brown dwarf, you'll want to stay current on those. The ministry also handles travel and carriage permits for everything from restricted cargo to restricted alerts.

When it comes to your starship, you're not dealing with the ministry—that turf belongs to the Bureau of Ships and Services, or BoSS. You ever meet a BoSS hierophant, kid, you're in for a trip. BoSS has been run by a handful of clans for eons. They've got their own weird traditions and language and secrets. Lots and lots of secrets. Even the Empire doesn't mess with BoSS. You don't want to, either.



Smuggling legend Platt Okeefe

BoSS keeps records of starship registrations, transponder codes, flight certifications, and weapon load-out permits, as well as astrographical and navigational information. It's constantly updating its databanks and transmitting them to starports and enforcement agencies. When you get your registry and accreditation, you'll also get a BoSS datapad. When a port official or Imperial boarding party asks for papers, this is what you hand them. If your papers aren't in order, kid, welcome to Kessel. Or maybe Akrit'tar. How do you get around BoSS? Leave that to the pros: You need your friendly neighborhood document forger to craft you some well-scrubbed data, and a well-connected slicer to slip all that sunshine into BoSS's data banks. Some free advice: Don't be cheap getting your BoSS profile doctored. If your data isn't clean, you may as well report to the nearest spice mine.

Still, you'll get caught eventually. So you better know the ImPeRe—the Imperial Penal References. There are five classes of ImPeRe infractions, ranking from Class Five to Class One in severity. Remember, though, that customs officials are all different—"a Hutt's Class Five is an Iotran's Class One," as we say. And as with most of life, location is everything. Be particularly careful in Sector Zero—that's the spacer name for Imperial Center Oversector, which contains all the worlds whose XYZ coordinates are positive and start with a zero. A middling infraction in the Inner Rim can cost you your ship in Sector Zero.

Class Fives are usually no big deal—they're for stuff like violating local import-export laws or lacking emergency equipment. Quints will get you a fine, which you can usually duck by slipping a local officer what we spacers call a personal benefit fee.

Class Fours are for stuff like expired licenses, minor tax evasion, or transporting run-of-the-mill narcotics without a permit. Any Corellian will tell you you're not a real smuggler until you've rung up your first Quad. Careful on the narcotics, though—local law enforcement can get touchy about some substances, and the Imperial Navy *hates* spice jockeys.

Class Threes govern attempted bribery or illegal transport of higher-value goods. A Trip is a big deal if you're in a fancy starport or looking across your BoSS pad at an angry Imp. Away from the bright lights, a donation to the local widows-and-orphans fund will make most Trips go away. Unless you've already drawn a Trip for attempted bribery, of course. You laugh, but I knew this dumb-as-a-dinko Rodian freighter jock who racked up a double-Trip that way . . .

Class Twos cover illegal transport of really expensive stuff and guns—running them and mounting them. Deuces can be heavy weather, kid. If you're caught moving blasters or your BoSS pad doesn't include those shiny new quad lasers, you'll probably wind up in the local brig, lose your ship, and draw a big fine. And if the Empire deals you a Deuce for piracy or Rebel activity, you can disappear.

Class Ones? Attacking other spacers, aggression against Imperial personnel, having a cloaking device, and conspiracy to overthrow the Empire. Capital offenses, in other words. An open Ace is a homing beacon for bounty hunters and stormtroopers, kid. You draw one of these, and it won't matter how many Elbas you buy me—I never knew you.

A Kalai Encounter

Horatio Varn-Kezzler, news correspondent, switched off the recorder and pocketed the device inside his carry-all. He certainly had more than enough material here for a story, perhaps even a series of reports.

"So correspondent?" The man stretched out his long frame. "Does this answer your questions about Zirtran's Anchor?"

"Indeed. And then some. I'm hoping this article will appear in the stacks about starport travel. I'd say that you and a certain Miss Okeefe have been more than helpful." Horatio pulled himself out from behind the table and paid the robo-tender the entire tab plus a sizable tip. He offered the man a chit of credit vouchers as well, but the man pushed the small cloth bag away.

"Unnecessary."

"But you're taking quite a chance, coming forward like this. Not everyone wants to talk about the Anchor's disappearance — or the Kalai."

"Everyone needs a little excitement every now and then." he winked.

Horatio nodded and reluctantly left. He wished he could have listened to the man for a while longer, but he had a deadline looming. He patted the holo-tapes in his bag with

growing excitement. For the first time ever, the truth about Zirtran's Anchor revealed!

The man smiled, laughing a bit to himself as he pulled out a steam pipe. The truth about Zirtran's Anchor, indeed! The correspondent had only scratched the surface.

The chandelier of tiny lights over the man's head seemed to shudder. Droplets of light fell slowly from the ceiling. The other patrons in the dark cantina failed to notice as the lights began to coalesce and take form as a single bubble of dancing light. The bubble's glow changed color as a thought took shape.

Does he suspect?

A trail of steam drifted from the pipe in the man's hands. "He's just a boy. Completely naive. He has no idea what was going on. Did you find out what you wanted to know?"

His memories as a young child were strong. He was raised on Coruscant, the Imperial capital. He provided much useful information about the Empire. In time, I believe he will join us.

The man's features began to change as he continued to puff away on his pipe. His face became pale and thin, his nose sharp and pronounced, and his eyes thin and bright. The Kalai lethagoe fusion laughed as he reclined back in his seat.

"Glad to be of service, father."

GALAXYWIDE **NewsNets**

Danna sauntered into the lounge and found Gabriel chuckling over her computer console. "Well, just popped us into hyperspace. We ought to hit Gyndine in a couple of hours. It's late in the season, but hopefully their grain market can stand one more hold full of denta beans." He looked down over her shoulder and glanced at the lines scrolling up her screen. "What's new on the NewsNets, Gabby?"

Gabby rolled her eyes and snickered. "Oh, not much, really. Snowmen crashing parties on freedom-loving worlds everywhere, a tariff increase on Brentaal has put imports in the can, bad year for hemmel crops on Delle II, and would you believe Serra Hailey is trying to revive her holo career?"

Danna chuckled. "So? That's what's got you chortling?"

Gabby winked up at him. "Nahhhh. Ran into an old smuggler pal turned code dealer at the spaceport, and got him to sell me this month's access codes to the big CYN." Danna looked blankly at her. Gabby sighed in exasperation. "You know, Cynabar's InfoNet. Strictly blackmarket node outta Nar Shaddaa. Ring a bell?"

Danna raised his eyebrows in dawning comprehension, and whistled. "Hoo boy, Gabby ... you mean we're plugged in?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean, sport, and big time. With a CYN code dealer in pocket, the sky's the limit!" Gabby rose, cracking her knuckles with satisfaction. "Why don't you talk the nav computer into rerouting us out to Lan Barell? Word has it that Lommite is going real cheap out there, no questions asked. And besides," she said, pulling him close for a quick kiss, "if we dump the beans, we might be able to pack in enough Lommite to pay off this crate on one run ..."

"Crate?"

The Farlander Papers

The Sentence

There was no trial, no hope of appeal, just the blaring voice of the Imperial commander reading our sentence.

"People of Tondatha, on the planet of Agamar, in the Lahara sector...You have been found guilty of sedition against the EMpire, and of plotting against the great Emperor Palpatine. Your punishment will be imposed without delay."

This was followed by the immediate scream of concussion missiles launched from orbit, then explosive detaonations that shook the ground wit staccato convulsions, and finally the heavy balster fire, ripping thorough roofd, butning our families and friends...

I try not to think about the day our town was obliterated-the day everything I believed about humanity and the order of the galaxy was turned upside down. My parents died that day, and I, at heart, became a Rebel.

Were my parent truly Alliance collaborators, and somehow deserving of their fate? Was anybody in our small, backwater town guilty of the crimes we were accused of, and then punished for without mercy? I knew I wasn't. Not yet, anyway.

I was on my way back from Calna Muun, what we used to call the "big City", on the fateful day. I had just run an errand for my father, and was taking a short detour through a small forest of binka trees. I liked to use the trees as obstacles, pushing my T-16 landspeeder to the limit as I zigzagged through the grove.

From a distance, I spotted the Empire's assault vehicle dropping into the upper atmosphere. It was massive-the biggest thing I'd ever seen in the skies above Agamer-and the sight of it filled me with foreboding. I pushed my speeder to the brink of overload, racing towards home.

The Imperial craft seemed to parallel my course.

Ringers

The kid was just too damned lucky. Ignoring the bustle of the busy Stassia squad room around him, Sergeant Zeck Tambell watched the holo again with an odd mix of personal envy and professional disgust. Amid the clutter on his desk, a miniature Reye Sedeya was gloating over his credstick while a security droid stood nearby, stolidly guarding the skinny kid and his winnings.

Big winnings, too. The booth only accepted 1,000-credit minimum bets.

Tambell's mouth twisted and he thumbed off the holopad, shoving it further back in the mess. Grimacing at the taste, he drained the last tepid drops of caff from his cup, crumpled it into a compact little ball, leaned back in his chair and carefully took aim.

It landed in the water garden with a satisfying splash, and across the room, Corporal Valon Rizz twitched as drops spattered across the list of Imperial stop-and-detains he was scanning.

"Blast it, Tambell, knock it off!" he growled, shooting a glare across the four desks that separated them. "You're killing my plants!"

Tambell grinned. "I'm perfecting my aim," he corrected the younger investigator. "You never know when I'll have to shoot a` Rebel off your back."

"I'll take my chances," Rizz said, fishing the soggy ball out of the bowl on his desk. He frowned when he saw Tambell's latest toss had bruised one of the delicate white lilies floating in the water. "Look at that," he accused. "They're looking worse every day."

"Oh, relax. They're fine." Tambell swung booted feet up onto his desk, ignoring the pile of data cards that slithered off the edge and clattered to the floor below. He crossed his arms, looking thoughtful. "Say, Rizz, what do you know about ringers?"

Rizz snorted. "I'd stick with squad room sports, if I were you."

"I just caught this case," Tambell said, as if he hadn't heard. "Kid betting on ringer tournaments whose luck's just too good to be true. Six bets, six wins -- he's gotta be rigging it somehow."

"Bribing some of the tossers to lose, maybe?" Rizz suggested.

"That's what I thought," Tambell agreed. "But the credits look clean, according to Franni." The Finance Retrieval and Net Investigations droid was a wonder at piecing together a money trail. "The kid's winnings match his bank deposits, and Franni can't find more than a couple hundred missing credits out of the whole pile. It would take a lot more than that to convince me to throw a tournament."

"So maybe they're getting something out of it besides money," Rizz said. Tambell looked skeptical, and the younger man shrugged. "Okay, so maybe he's got something rigged. Some kind of repulsor field or something, so they can't get the ring in. Or maybe he really is lucky."

"Nobody's *that* lucky," Tambell said. "Besides, the lieutenant says this one comes from higher up -- someone on our glorious leader's staff wants this kid checked out."

Rizz frowned warningly at the reference to Stassia's Imperial Governor Tren Pergallis, under whose auspices their Special Investigations squad looked into local matters of interest to the Empire. Tambell ignored the look. "It's not our usual kind of case, but if someone up there wants him, then we gotta get him. These ringer tournaments are like watching duracrete set, but--"

The squad room's comm scanner cut him off mid-sentence, blaring out the piercing tones used to summon rescue-and-repair units, followed by the dispatcher's impassive voice. "Assist units at the swoop track with an accident," it said. "Swoop into a pit; confirmed fatalities. Please acknowledge."

Tambell met Rizz's eyes, and they both grimaced. Swoop racing was a popular sport, but its accidents were notoriously messy. "That reminds me, you working the Sweepstakes this year?" Rizz asked. Swoop jocks had been pouring in from all over the sector to compete in the annual race day after tomorrow, and local enforcement paid triple-time to Imperial officers who helped with crowd control.

"No," Tambell said shortly. Even the lure of triple pay wasn't enough to make him forget the sight of last year's grisly wreck.

Rizz looked at him curiously, but let it pass. "So, check out the ringers' equipment next," he advised. "See if this kid's rigged up some kind of device we haven't heard of."

"You're the tech-junkie. Come with me and see for yourself," Tambell invited. "I'll even buy you lunch."

Rizz shot him a look. "Gee, thanks," he said dryly. "The last lunch you sprung for happened to have contraband spice in it. Having my stomach purged so the inspector could get a sample was *not* my idea of a good time."

"It got us the evidence we needed, didn't it?" he reminded the younger man. "C'mon. It'll be fun."

"I thought you said watching ringers is about as fun as putting on your socks," Rizz grumbled, nevertheless switching off his datapad and standing up.

Tambell grinned. "Even lower," he promised.

* * *

Besides the ringers tournament going on in Pavilion C, there was an event Tambell vaguely recognized from the holovid going on down on the stadium's main field.

He watched as something resembling a humpbacked drometard trampled across the synthturf with the rest of the beasts in pursuit, but the peak of the action was blocked from view when the spectators in front of them leapt to their feet, screaming encouragement. Tambell kept walking, and a quarter of the way around the stadium, tapped Rizz's shoulder to stop him in front of a refreshment booth.

"What's this?" Rizz asked suspiciously, eyeing the greasy droids behind the counter with trepidation.

"Lunch," Tambell said. "And hurry it up. I want to get there before the tournament starts."

He hid a grin as Rizz gingerly ordered, casting a glance around while the order was processed. For this time of day, a decent-sized crowd milled about the betting booths and refreshment stands. Mostly Stassians, but Tambell saw a fetching Twi'lek female studying the beast game on the holo monitors, and a gaggle of Bimms squabbling as they placed a bet at one of the far booths.

And behind them stood Sedeya, credstick clutched at the ready: Tambell stiffened, eyes flicking to the booth's 5,000-credit minimum bet requirement. Not only was the skinny kid somehow flamming them, he was making a blasted fortune at it, too.

He nudged Rizz, nodded towards Sedeya, and they casually headed his way, stopping a few booths away. Tambell pretended to study the tournament program he'd bought downstairs while Rizz crunched his chipitas and covertly eyed the attractive Twi'lek. After Sedeya had placed his bet and hurried away, Tambell stepped up to the booth.

But not to place a wager.

Keying his security ID into the gambling machine, he tapped out a special access code. The machine hummed to itself for a few moments, then spit a

datastub out of the slot into his waiting hand. The plastic stub contained information on the last dozen wagers placed at this booth, and it only took a moment to plug it into his datapad and discover that Sedeya had just bet 10,000 credits on Tosser Five to win today's tournament.

He looked up, gaze running over the various tote boards until he found the right one. With Tosser Five posting 12 to one odds, the kid looked poised to collect his biggest payoff yet.

Tambell gritted his teeth. "Let's get up there," he growled, showing Rizz the amount before pocketing the datapad and heading briskly toward Pavilion C. They were 15 meters from the entrance when he recognized the men standing alertly near the door.

Watchdogs. Hired muscle from the kennel of notorious Stassian crime madame Aalia Duu-lang.

The back of Tambell's neck tightened. Where Aalia went, larceny wasn't far behind. And, as he'd found to his personal and professional chagrin, the lady and her illicit doings were damn tricky to pin down. The aqua-eyed witch had brains, and she used them. Usually to get someone else to do her dirty work so her dainty hands stayed clean.

Beside him, Rizz slowed in slight hesitation.

"Yeah, I see 'em," Tambell said. They got to the door, and he stared at the first man, then the second; a deliberate gaze that both gamely pretended not to see. They recognized him, too, and attracting an Imperial investigator's attention wasn't in their job description.

He let Rizz precede him into the pavilion; a large room well-lit by the sun shining through the transparisteel skylights overhead. A stairway led down past several rows of seats to the tournament range, where multi-shaped rings hung suspended from the ceiling. Each odd shaped ring was worth a certain number of points, and the tosser with the most points at the end of four rounds won.

"How do they start 'em swinging?" Rizz asked, studying the metal tangle.

"Let's go see," Tambell said, and headed down the steps.

Up close, the rings looked deceptively innocuous. He'd been amazed the first time he'd seen a holo of it: the rings swinging back and forth in uneven arcs or gliding around in a spiraling orbit, while the tossers toed the competition line and carefully gauged the best moment, and with how much force, to toss their little metallic disks to get them through some portion of the hoops. Though a pretty fair aim himself, Tambell was grateful his own squad room targets held still.

Rizz eyed the rings speculatively. "There's a couple of ways this could work," he said. "He could polarize the rings and the disks, or equip one or the other with some kind of repulsor field. Then, no matter how well they aimed, they wouldn't be able to make ringers."

"Except that all the tossers use the same equipment," Tambell pointed out. "A pre-set device like that would keep the winner from making ringers just as much as it would prevent the losers."

"Hmmm," Rizz said. "What if it were something he could control? With a remote, or something?" He half-turned to study the tiers of seats. "He could sit close by, and..." His voice trailed off.

Tambell turned to see what had caught his attention. The headache that had threatened earlier when he saw Aalia Duu-lang's hired watchdogs announced its arrival with a piercing stab.

There was the lady herself, in a box seat near the edge of the range. Lush blond hair shimmered in the sunlight, and her sea-green eyes shone as she smiled warmly at the teen sitting beside her. Tambell wasn't fooled by her inviting manner, though he thought the bemused-looking Sedeya might be. Aalia Duu-lang hadn't clawed her way up Stassia's crime hierarchy on her womanly charms alone. The lady had a shrewd streak a kilometer wide, and greed was her middle name.

He sighed, absently rubbing his forehead in a vain attempt to stave off the headache. If Sedeya and Aalia were in this together, his work was definitely cut out. Aalia had a way of covering her tracks and protecting her -- er, *assets*.

As if feeling their eyes upon her, she glanced up, gaze narrowing just a bit as she identified him and Rizz before negligently returning her attention to the kid at her side. "What now?" Rizz asked.

"What else?" Tambell shrugged. "We watch 'em. See what happens."

They found seats close to Aalia's box, where Tambell had a good view of Sedeya's hands as well as his face. Gazing at Aalia with an expression of shy admiration mixed with apprehension, the kid seemed completely unaware he was being watched.

The tournament began, and Tambell's mouth quirked as Sedeya leaned forward to concentrate on the action, the abrupt move leaving Aalia chatting to empty air after the first toss. But besides that, there wasn't much to see. Elbows resting on his bony knees and empty hands clasped before him in plain sight, all the kid did was stare at the tossers with unblinking intensity.

After the first few tosses, Rizz stepped down to the edge of the range. Studying the tossers, their disks, and the rings for any tell-tale signs of trickery, he sent a look over his shoulder at Tambell, who gave him the same look right back. The tossers weren't scoring much, but he knew from the holos that wasn't unusual.

Then Sedeya's pick toed the line. Lightly fingering her disk, she swung her arm a few times as if to synchronize her movements with the swinging rings, then let it fly. Applause greeted her effort as she tossed a ringer -- and through the tricky Ace ring yet, putting her into the lead.

Through it all, Sedeya did... nothing. Not a twitch of the hand, barely a blink of the eye. As Tosser Five's name flashed to the top of the scoreboard, Aalia slanted a curious glance at her silent seatmate. Tambell wondered if she had placed a wager on the tournament, too.

The next seven tossers had varied success. One more managed an Ace, creating a tie going into the second round, and during the short break that followed, Tambell joined Rizz at the edge of the range. He watched as the kid slowly straightened up and blinked as if he'd been asleep, and Aalia leaned close to whisper in his ear.

"I don't know," Rizz said in answer to Tambell's unspoken question. "Hard to say without checking either him or the equipment out. But I didn't see anything obvious."

They glanced over at Aalia's box to find Sedeya looking back with a startled expression. Still pressing her shoulder to his, Aalia's eyes were amused, but she looked taken aback when the kid suddenly stood up. She said something in a low voice and he hesitated, then sidled towards the steps anyway. Her eyes chilled at his retreating back, and the two watchdogs sitting behind rose to their feet, clearly intent on following.

Whether to protect the kid, or get rid of evidence, the investigators didn't know. They looked at each other. "I guess we'd better take him in," Tambell said. "About time I had a chat with him, anyway."

At the door, they spotted him making tracks towards the turbolift cluster that serviced Pavilion C. Aalia's associates had lengthened stride to catch up, and he and Rizz did the same. Sedeya was waiting for a lift with the associates loitering casually nearby when they arrived. The kid glanced at them nervously, then looked away, chewing at his lower lip.

One of the turbolift's doors opened, and Sedeya slunk aboard. The watchdogs made to follow, but Tambell stepped in front of them, casually pulling his vest away to display the Imperial badge and blaster attached to his belt. They hesitated, looked over his shoulder at Rizz and Sedeya standing in the lift, then reluctantly stepped back.

He nodded approvingly, watching their wary faces until the door slid shut, then turned to survey an unhappy-looking Sedeya. As the lift sank downwards, the kid clearly wished he were somewhere -- anywhere -- else.

"Sergeant Tambell, Special Investigator for the Imperial Governor," he identified himself, watching the other's face turn white. "You've had quite a winning streak at the ringers tournaments -- haven't you, Citizen Sedeya?"

Sedeya flinched at the sound of his name, swallowed, and summoned the nerve to briefly look him in the eye. "I've been lucky," he managed.

Tambell nodded, pleased. If the kid was this intimidated now, perhaps with a little encouragement he'd spill it all at the station. "Well," he said, "I regret to inform you that your luck has just run dry."

* * *

The first thing Tambell found out was that Sedeya was clean. Neither the scan nor the physical search turned up any kind of device like that Rizz envisioned being used to tilt the results of the tournament.

The second thing he discovered was that the kid was incredibly inept when it came to proper criminal behavior.

He was polite and well-mannered, albeit a bit skittish. He didn't fuss about having a Defender present, called Tambell "sir," and actually thanked him when offered a seat in Interrogation Room One.

Used to dealing with surly, uncooperative suspects, Tambell sat and simply stared at him. Sedeya gazed back apprehensively, looking younger than his 19 years, and far more vulnerable than any self-respecting flammer would ever let himself be seen.

"Um, am I under arrest, sir?" he asked tentatively. "You didn't say, earlier."

"If it's up to me, you will be," Tambell said, deliberately harsh as Sedeya's thin face paled, and he wilted further into his seat. "But no, you're not under arrest. You're being detained. For the moment," he added.

He let the kid think about that as Rizz fetched three cups of caffa, then pulled a chair over and sat down so they were both facing him across the table. The seating arrangement was more calculated than chance -- it was his turn to play nasty to Rizz's niece. He waited until Sedeya was shifting uneasily in his seat before starting in. "You're aware that fraud is a crime against the Empire, punishable by deportation to a prison world, aren't you?"

Sedeya nodded hesitantly.

"Well then, explain to me how you were smart enough to figure out a way to pull it off, but too stupid to get away with it?" He watched as the kid's

expression ran through a series of emotions: shock, and surprise, before finally settling on what appeared to be confusion.

"I -- I don't understand," he said, uncertainly looking from Tambell's accusing eyes to Rizz's less judgmental ones. "What are you talking about?"

It was a good show, but Tambell wasn't buying the wide-eyed bit. "Six bets? Six wins?" He cocked his head skeptically. "Isn't that a bit too coincidental?"

The kid dropped his gaze. "I've been lucky," he mumbled to the tabletop.

Tambell snorted. "Some might say there's more to it than that."

"It's true," he said earnestly. "I've always been lucky. That doesn't mean I've done anything wrong. I haven't."

"Listen;" Tambell said. "Nobody's *that* lucky. Not without a little help."

"There's no law against winning. I haven't done anything wrong." A trace of resentment crept into Sedeya's tone.

Tambell heard it. Sardonicly, he offered, "Take a word of advice, kid. Most flammers go ahead and lose a few, just to throw us off track."

Sedeya frowned, but didn't say anything. Tambell waited, hoping for more of a reaction. Getting suspects riled often paid rewards when they tripped up in the rush to defend themselves. "Okay, so tell me this," he said, changing tacks when it became clear Sedeya wasn't going to rise to the bait. "What's your relationship with Aalia Duu-lang?"

The kid looked startled -- and vaguely alarmed. "I don't have one. I just met her today!"

"How?"

"Before the tournament. This guy I met last week introduced me to her."

"You know who she is, don't you?" Tambell pressed. Sedeya hesitated, clearly uncomfortable.

"Not really." '

"Now, there you go again," Tambell admonished. "Six wins, no losses, and you've been seen with one of the most notorious crime madames on Stassia. What does that look like to you?"

Sedeya shrugged.

"So if you don't know her, what did Aalia want with *you*?"

The kid smiled humorlessly. "The same as you," he said. "She wanted to know why my luck was so good. How I pick winners. That sort of thing."

"Did you tell her?"

"Sure," he said. "It's no secret. She offered me a job."

Tambell raised an eyebrow, and leaned forward to give the kid his best I'm-gonna-get-you glare. "You don't want to get involved with her, if you're not already," he pointedly advised. "We'll take her down one of these days, and we'll take you right down with her."

Sedeya looked away without responding, and after a moment, Rizz took over the questioning. "So, how *do* you pick'em?" he asked amiably.

The kid looked at him, confused. "Huh?"

"Which tosser's going to win? How do you pick them?"

"Oh." Sedeya thought about it for a moment. "Well, I watch them warm up before the tournament. See how they're tossing, and stuff. Usually there's just something I like about them."

Rizz asked another question, and listening to his gentle voice amid careful verbal probes, Tambell was reminded of the time they'd had Aalia Duu-lang in that chair. That time, he'd played the nice guy while Rizz nipped at her heels.

Perhaps that was why Sedeya's innocent act rankled him so. He felt a dull burning at the memory. He'd been nice all right -- *way* too nice.

Four years ago, when Aalia was still an associate slithering around doing her crime lord's bidding, they'd picked her up in connection with a credit counterfeiting scheme. He'd looked into those incredible eyes and dove into his role with relish, never noticing the serpent that swam just under her

seemingly sweet surface. They hadn't been able to make the charges stick, and she'd gone on to forge her own little corner on Stassia's crime market. And they hadn't been able to touch her since.

But what really gnawed at him was the secret knowledge that he'd halfway believed her protestations of innocence. *She'd* played *him* -- for a fool.

That wasn't going to happen this time.

He focused back in on Rizz and Sedeya. The kid was telling Rizz how he'd always been good at picking winners. Color had returned to his thin face, and his voice was animated. "It got to be that they started betting on who would come in second, cause if I said one was going to win, it *won*," he said.

"Is that what it's like with the ringers?" Rizz asked.

Sedeya nodded. "Sort of. I just picture the winner making ringers, and the losers missing. And it happens. Luck." He shrugged. Tambell rolled his eyes.

"Oh yeah. Right, kid," he cut in derisively. "You call it luck, I call it a flam. You don't really expect us to believe that load of munk?"

Sedeya just looked at him. "It's true," he said stubbornly. Tambell shook his head in disgust, sat back in his chair and took a sip of caffa, listening as Rizz led Sedeya on a roundabout query of his knowledge of electronics. The more ignorant the kid sounded, the more disgusted he got.

Then it occurred to him: maybe Sedeya really *did* think it was luck. Maybe he was as wet behind the ears as he sounded, and Aalia's associates were handling the mechanics of the fraud, rigging the equipment or bribing the tossers, while he was just the front they used to divert attention from themselves. Maybe the kid didn't know he was already working for Aalia.

Tambell sat considering all the angles that accompanied the theory. It was another avenue to explore, anyway. One that might end up giving them the goods on that aqua-eyed witch. He smiled.

Finishing off the caffa, he absently crumpled the cup and glanced around for a place to get rid of it. Not three meters away, a waste bin with a wide, inviting rim rested against the wall. An easy shot.

He missed.

Tambell stared as the crumpled ball skittered to a halt on the floor beyond. He couldn't believe it. The bin was easily three times as large as Rizz's water garden, and closer to boot. How could he miss?

Feeling eyes upon him, he glanced across the table. Sedeya was looking at him stubbornly, while Rizz looked amused. "Looks like your winning streak's come to an end," he said.

That dry observation bothered Tambell the rest of the interview.

* * *

The next morning, he checked the sports scores and discovered that Sedeya's winning streak had come to an end, as well.

After her promising start, Tosser Five failed to maintain her lead and ended up finishing fourth. The kid was out the 10,000 credits he -- or, more likely, Aalia -- had wagered. Tambell wondered if she was annoyed.

He also wondered if she'd engineered the loss simply to throw them off the scent. He wouldn't put it past her, and the Hutts knew she could afford it.

He'd brought Rizz one of those spindly little lilies he liked so much to make up for the one he'd squashed yesterday, and after Rizz added it to the water garden and pointedly covered the bowl with a plasticsheet, they went over their impressions of the interview again.

"The kid's dumber than a space slug about electronics," Rizz said. "He wouldn't have a clue how to rig up something to tilt the tournament. You're right; we should concentrate on his connection to Aalia."

"Franni's already on it," Tambell said. "Meanwhile, let's take a look at what she's been up to lately. This isn't her usual style, but she's probably looking for ways to expand business."

"Yeah, and let's head back out to the stadium, too," Rizz said. "Take another look at the equipment. She's either got to be bribing the tossers, or rigging the rings. I want a closer look at--"

The comm scanner in the corner cut him off, and they listened as another accident was reported at the swoop track. Tambell grimaced. One more hotshot swoop jock who wouldn't be starting in tomorrow's big race. *Yuck*.

He returned his attention to Rizz. "I want to put a surveil-cam on Sedeya, too," he said. "The kid looks too green to notice he's being followed, and if he meets with Aalia, I want to know about it."

"Good idea," Rizz agreed. They discussed the plan of attack a while longer, then got to work. Then the lieutenant came in and gave Tambell grief about the case update he'd filed, and he had to waste time pawing around under his desk for the data cards that always seemed to pile up down there, and then waste more time looking up details on the kid that some bit-pusher upstairs just *had* to have. Then Franni gave them a list of Aalia's recent financial transactions, and he and Rizz were following up on that when the surveil-cam reported that Sedeya had been seen with the crime madame that afternoon.

The end result was that by the end of the day, they still hadn't made it out to the stadium to take a closer look at the ringers' equipment.

But they had discovered that Aalia did indeed appear to be moving into the field of wager fraud, and that the main topic of conversation during her meeting with Sedeya had been who the kid thought would win tomorrow's swoop sweepstakes.

* * *

"I'll have you know I'm giving up triple-time pay for this," Rizz grumbled the next day as he and Tambell inspected the rings in Pavilion C. All 12 ringer tossers, clearly unsettled by the Imperial investigators' summons, clustered together at the edge of the range, watching uneasily as the pair looked for evidence of ring tampering.

"Isn't bringing down Aalia Duu-lang worth it?" Tambell countered.

"Yeah, if we can do it," Rizz said sourly. "We've been over these twice already. There's nothing here. I say we move on to Plan B." Plan B was questioning the tossers. If they were going to nail Aalia, they needed to know whether to focus

their attention on the swoop jocks, or their equipment, after she and Sedeya cleaned up at today's big race.

"There's no way any of us would cheat," Tosser Five declared, folding her arms and looking across the pavilion to where Rizz was interviewing Tosser Three. "It's *tough* to make a ringer. We practice for it every day. You think after all that work we'd go out and deliberately try to *miss*?"

"You might if there were enough credits in it for you," Tambell said mildly.

She glared at him. "No, Sergeant. I wouldn't," she said firmly.

"Okay, so maybe you wouldn't," he agreed. "Would anybody else?"

"No!" she repeated with a scowl.

He eyed her indignant expression, decided she was probably telling the truth. He sighed. "Okay, so help me out a bit here," he said. "If the tossers aren't taking bribes, and the equipment isn't rigged, is there any other way someone could cheat?"

"No," she said again, then amended, "Well, not really. It's not like there's any Jedi around anymore."

Tambell looked at her sharply. "What?"

"Jedi," she repeated, starting to look a little nervous. "I've heard stories they could move things with their minds. Something called the Force. That would be handy playing ringers."

"The Force is nothing more than a legend," Tambell told her repressively. "And anyway, the Jedi are long gone. Extinct."

"Well, sure, like I said," she hurried to agree. "Good thing, too. I bet we'd all like to just picture the competition missing a toss, and have it happen. But that's impossible."

She went on, but Tambell was no longer listening. His mind replayed her words, hearing Sedeya's voice instead. What was it the kid had said? *I just picture the winners making ringers, and the losers missing. And it happens?*

He remembered his own missed toss the night of the interview, and Sedeya staring at him from across the table. He and Rizz hadn't been able to uncover evidence of bribes or rigged equipment, either. Was it possible the kid could do something that he wasn't consciously aware of?

Something like causing a competitor's performance to be off? Just enough to ensure a loss?

He suddenly remembered what day it was, and a chill ran down his back.

If such an unlikely thing were true, how might such a mysterious Force manifest itself in making sure that the right jock won a highspeed, close-quarters race, in which the slightest "off" performance could well prove fatal?

* * *

The huge domed arena that housed Stassia's swoop track was finally in sight. Glaring out at the sea of pedestrians clogging the street ahead of them, Tambell tried to strangle back his impatience and ended up thumping on the robo-hack's roof instead.

"There's no need to be abusive, sir," the droid brain running the robo-hack admonished him in affronted tones.

"Calm down, we're moving," Rizz added.

"Not fast enough," Tambell growled. Since Sedeya had lost his bet the other day when they'd pulled him away from the ringers tournament, he figured the kid had to be present for this Jedi thing to work. He had to get him away from the swoop track before the kid could start "picturing" losers.

Tambell's mouth tightened. He'd worry about how to keep this ridiculous Force stuff out of the report later. If the lieutenant thought he'd actually bought into any of that junk that passed for Jedi legend, his next assignment would be in the spice mines of Kessel.

Fighting back frustration, he dug out his comlink instead. "Hey Franni," he said when the droid answered. "Hook into the betting booths at the swoop track, will you? I want to know if Reye Sedeya or Aalia Duu-lang have placed any bets. How much, and on who. I want it as soon as possible," he added.

They'd edged a few blocks closer to the arena by the time Franni called back and reported that Sedeya had bet 10 credits on Bike Six to win.

Tambell frowned at the news. *Only 10 credits?*

But his scowl turned to a smile when he learned Aalia had more than made up for it.

She'd gone for the exacta, wagering 50,000 credits on Six to win; and Nine to place. Exactas were dicier to predict, but paid bigger rewards, and he wondered whether Sedeya could not only make Six win, but ensure that Nine came in second. For Aalia to collect, the jocks had to finish in that order.

And then it occurred to him -- maybe, just maybe, she'd hedged her bets.

All the swoop jocks wanted to win the big prize, of course, but the purses for third, fourth, fifth, and sixth places weren't cheap change either. Especially if they came with a little bonus for not finishing on top.

He got Franni checking on the right accounts, then took another look at the foot traffic flowing past outside. The entire city seemed out for a stroll. Tossing some change into the robo-hack's credit tray, he opened the door and fought his way out to the crowded curb with Rizz trailing in his wake. The way they'd been crawling along, they'd get there faster on foot.

Joining the swarm heading for the arena entrance, they flashed their badges at the ticket droid and were waved inside. They squeezed onto the first available lift plate carrying spectators up to the grandstand and, once on top, Rizz dug out a locator and flipped it on, keying in a code. A green dot winked in the grid's center, and after the device sent out its invisible feelers, a blinking red dot appeared at the edge of the grid.

Tambell looked at it, then glanced down at the several thousand packed seats surrounding the oval track. "Figures," he said sourly. The surveil-cam tracking Sedeya wasn't that far away -- but it was straight across the track, indicating that the kid and Aalia were seated somewhere on the far side. He and Rizz would have to go all the way around.

And they didn't have time.

The traditional call to the post pealed out of the grandstand's comm speakers and was promptly drowned out by the crowd's anticipatory roar. Tambell caught a glimpse of the jocks cruising out of the pits and onto the track, their swoops' lethal-looking steering vanes glittering like bayonets under the dome's bright lights. They looked well-protected in their colorful body armor and helmets, but he knew just how useless the stuff really was in a crash.

Tiers of seats marched down to where a six-meter high duracrete wall marked the drop-off to the track below. If a jock lost control of his swoop, the wall theoretically stopped him from plunging into the grandstand. In reality, since swoops crash up as well as down, the wall wasn't much comfort to the spectators in the lower tiers.

Not that it mattered. The seats were the most expensive, and they always sold out.

The jocks finished their post parade and zipped down the track, engines whining as they accelerated over the warm-up obstacle, a metal gate that could easily accommodate most of the field as they raced abreast. Later, several laps into the race, the obstacles would get narrower, the jocks vying to get over, under, or through in the dwindling space. Tambell had always thought that for supposedly intelligent beings, swoop jocks had precious little common sense. Or else a death wish.

He and Rizz started down the steps. It was a long way to the track below, and by the time they were halfway down the swoops had lined up. The buzz of the crowd disappeared under a deafening chorus of mechanical screams as the jocks revved their thrusters, but even at full throttle, the swoops were stymied by the repulsor web holding them at the post.

The countdown blinked down on the displays covering the duracrete wall, and the crowd picked up the chant, stamping their feet with each number. At zero, the displays went green, the swoops plunged forward, the spectators went wild, and Tambell groaned.

"We'll never get there in time," he shouted over his shoulder to Rizz, who nodded agreement. They reached the bottom tier just as the field whined past

on its ninth lap, the swoops bobbing like boats on a storm-tossed sea as they dipped to avoid one of the obstacles hovering over the track.

Rizz held up the locator. "They're practically straight across," he shouted, pointing out over the infield where mechanics and maintenance droids clogged the pits. Tambell looked around for some way to get to the other side before reluctantly concluding the long drop below was it.

"So, let's go across," he shouted back.

Rizz stared at him -- *Are you nuts?* -- but didn't protest as Tambell edged between the wall and the first tier of seats. A laser-link security fence glowed in front of them: criss-crossed thin red lines which discouraged over-enthusiastic onlookers from jumping onto the track. They stepped on toes and otherwise annoyed the spectators before Tambell finally found what he was looking for. He slid his security ID into a slot, and a 10-meter section of the laser-link fence winked out.

He looked at the drop below and sighed, but swung a leg over the rim of the duracrete wall anyway. Boot bumping against the tote board display, now flashing with the numbers of the leading swoops, he swung his other leg over, took a deep breath, and let go.

About a third of the way down, he realized the six-meter drop was way beyond his capacity to comfortably land, and scrambled madly at the tote board as it flashed past. Catching an edge helped slow his descent, but gave his arms an awful yank, and his whole body felt the impact when his feet finally hit the ground.

Gritting his teeth, he tilted his head to look up at Rizz. The younger man didn't look enthusiastic, but tucked the locator away, carefully poised himself on top of the rim, and then surprised Tambell by making a sudden lunge for the nearest obstacle, hovering over the track a little less than two meters from the wall. It dipped under his weight as he caught the closest edge, and before its repulsors could compensate, Rizz had dropped lightly to the ground.

"You okay?" he asked in concern, seeing Tambell's pinched face. Nodding shortly, Tambell tried to take a step, and found his feet weren't done being numb yet. The whine of the swoops headed their way once more and,

flattening himself against the wall, he tried not to wince as they roared by, steering vanes making little slicing noises in the air.

Once they were past, he and Rizz headed for the infield, stepping over hydraulic lines and containers of lubricant and avoiding greasy mechanics as they weaved through the pits. They were at the far side, staring across the track and wondering how they were going to get back up that blasted wall when a different sort of whine drew Tambell's attention to the side.

Their little jaunt hadn't gone unnoticed by track security. A small floater plat stopped a few meters away, and a stern-looking officer ordered them to come with her. They glanced at each other, shrugged, and agreeably stepped up. The woman's expression changed when Tambell showed her his badge. "Oh," she said. "How can I help you, Sergeant?"

She set them down near the top of the grandstand, and they had just stepped off the plat when a howl rose from the crowd, punctuated by scattered shrieks and screams. The officer squinted at the far side of the track, then yanked out her macrobinoculars and studied the spill. "It's okay," she reported after a moment. "No spectators hurt, anyway. Thankfully. We mopped up for weeks afterwards, last year."

Tambell grimaced. "C'mon," he said to Rizz. "Let's get that kid." Aalia and her entourage weren't hard to find, not with the locater showing Sedeya practically dead ahead. Not that he needed it anyway; Aalia's bright blonde hair reflected the overhead lights like a mirror, and her eyes were unfathomable as she stared over her shoulder at them from where she held court in a comfortable box seat on one of the middle tiers. Sedeya, his skinny body radiating unease, sat beside her.

Two of the watchdogs took up positions on either side of the box as Tambell stepped up to its entrance, but he wasn't surprised when Aalia treated him and Rizz to the full force of her charm. "Corporal Tambell," she greeted him warmly. "I didn't know you were a swoop enthusiast."

"It's *Sergeant* now, and I'm not," Tambell said flatly. He nodded towards Sedeya. "We're here for your friend." The kid stared at him, looking stricken, but at least his attention was off the race going on below.

Aalia's perfect smile never wavered. "Do you have a detention order?"

"Will I need one?" he countered, looking into those incredible eyes and recognizing the cold contempt that lurked in their depths. At his belt, his comlink beeped and he pulled it out and handed it to Rizz without breaking the gaze. Rizz stepped to the side and handled the call.

"Yes, I think you will," Aalia said. "After that unpleasantness at the tournament the other day, Reye's had quite enough of cooperating with you. Haven't you, Reye?"

The kid squirmed in his chair and started to say something, but she put a warning hand on his arm. He gulped and shut up. "Come back when you have a detention order, *Sergeant*," she advised, still smiling pleasantly. "Otherwise, please move aside. You're blocking our view."

Tambell felt anger start to burn. Four years ago, at least she'd had the proper respect for Imperial authority. Now she was downright arrogant. Before he could respond, Sedeya slid out from under Aalia's manicured hand and stood up. "That's all right, sir," he mumbled, not looking at the crime madame. "I'll come with you."

Aalia's smile remained in place, but her eyes were abruptly icy. "Are you sure that's what you want to do?" she asked. "You don't have to go with him, Reye. Not if he doesn't have an order."

"It's okay," Sedeya mumbled, edging towards the entrance. Tambell suddenly had the impression that the prospect of staying with Aalia scared him even more than what might happen if he went with them.

"But don't you want to wait and see if you win your bet?" she prompted.

The kid scurried past him out the box and stopped by Rizz, near the stairs. "Uh, not really," he said. "I wasn't feeling very lucky when I made it."

Tambell paused at the statement. Did it mean Reye had already decided not to play his part in Aalia's scheme? If so, he might be persuaded to tell them what he knew about it. He turned back to Aalia. "I'll be back for you later," he promised softly. "After you've won *your* bet."

Her eyes narrowed, and the smile slanted into something suspiciously close to a sneer. "You just do that."

"Actually, I don't think we'll need to come back," Rizz interrupted, handing back Tambell's comlink as he stepped to his side. "I think we can take her in right now."

Tambell looked at him, raised an eyebrow.

"That was Franni," Rizz said. "Seems there's been a number of deposits posted to the accounts of several jocks in today's race -- except for a notable few."

"Like the ones on Aalia's exacta ticket?" Tambell suggested.

"A coincidence, I'm sure," Rizz agreed. "Some of the funds come from a restaurant down south, some from a cantina in Stassia City, and some from a couple of other seemingly unrelated businesses. But they all do have one thing in common." He glanced at the crime madame. "It gets a little convoluted, but the upshot is that Aalia Duulang has a financial interest in all of them."

Aalia was no longer smiling.

"That doesn't mean anything," she said disdainfully, tossing blond hair back over one shoulder. "I have several business interests. I can't keep track of every credit they pay out, or who they pay them to. You're grabbing at drive trails if you think you can prove a connection."

The growing roar of the crowd nearly drowned her out. Caught up in the business at hand, Tambell hadn't realized the race was in its final laps, but suddenly the whole grandstand seemed to seethe as fans screamed their favorites to the finish. A small stampede headed down the stairs towards the laser-link fence, and Tambell glanced over to see Sedeya slipping stealthily up the steps.

The kid's face was wary but determined, and Tambell had taken a step after him when a whisper of movement to his left had him whipping the blaster off his belt instead. He pointed it at one of Aalia's watchdogs, who was pointing one right back.

The man froze when he saw that Sedeya's defection hadn't proven enough of a diversion. Rizz kept the other watchdog covered as the results of the race were announced. Aalia's mouth tightened as a smile spread over Tambell's face.

"Congratulations," he said. "You've just won a one-way ticket to Kessel."

Her eyes were glacial. "You'll never make the charges stick," she said coldly as they disarmed the two associates. "Your *real* suspect's gotten away, but don't think you'll be able to pin this on me."

"He isn't going far," Tambell said. "He can't shake the surveil-cam."

"Oh? He already has," she said, looking pointedly over his shoulder.

Tambell half-turned, and saw the device hovering several tiers down, turning this way and that as if searching the crowd in confusion. He frowned, then shrugged nonchalantly for Aalia's benefit. "No problem. We'll just pick him up later."

Maybe by then he'd have thought up some excuse to explain the kid's involvement in all this. Something that didn't mention Jedi, or any weird Force. Not that he believed in such superstition, of course. But there was no sense even mentioning it to his superiors. It would only get him in trouble.

And meanwhile, there was Aalia.

After four long years, they finally had her. He smiled in satisfaction, pulled a set of binders off his belt, and handed them to Rizz.

"Is that really necessary?" Aalia asked haughtily.

"No," Rizz told her, snapping them around her wrists anyway. Spectators stared at them curiously as they filed past up the stairs, and Tambell searched the grandstand again for a glimpse of Reye.

Oh well, he thought. The kid was too dumb to elude them for long. Then again, he had seemed too dumb to elude them at all...

Tambell shrugged. He'd worry about it later. Ignoring Aalia's vicious green glare, he thumbed on his comlink, called dispatch, and requested a prisoner pickup.

A

Rancor Comes to Tatooine

Bidlo Kwerve sat before the heavy shield doors to Jabba the Hutt's desert palace, watching as Cann Doon's smuggled cargo was unloaded. Bidlo's orders were to supervise the process, then bring Doon to Jabba's audience chamber. A Gamorrean could handle this assignment, thought Bidlo, but complaining wasn't the way to get ahead in the Hutt's organization, and Bidlo definitely wanted to get ahead.

His chief competition was the Twi'lek, Bib Fortuna. Fortuna was always fawning over the Hutt, waving head tails and agreeing with every belch the crime lord uttered — Bidlo thought it was sickening. But someday Bidlo would show them his true value. Someday . . .

The afternoon wore on. Bidlo was sipping his sixth Corellian ale when a loud rumble echoed from the desert. Cann grabbed Bidlo's arm nervously, spilling half the ale on Bidlo's tunic, and pointed dumbfoundedly as a massive form arose from behind a sandy ridge.

"Relax," Bidlo told him, getting to his feet and wiping at the purple stain. "It's just a sandcrawler. Wonder what the little vermin want."

He ordered a Gamorrean to keep an eye on the smuggler while he went out to talk with the Jawas. "Probably want to sell us another salt water converter," he muttered.

The Jawas jabbered excitedly. It was hard for Bidlo to follow, but if he understood correctly, they'd discovered a wrecked spaceship out near the Dune Sea. That wasn't so strange; but they also insisted that a monster lived inside the wreck. It had killed two Jawas, and if Jabba wouldn't buy the salvage rights from them, they were going to grind the wreck — monster and all — under the treads of their sandcrawler.

They had probably spent too much time under the twin suns, Bidlo decided, but this might be worth checking into. Jabba's birthday was coming up, and if Bidlo Kwerve could give the crime lord his very own monster, Bidlo's future in the syndicate was secure.

After a haggling session that was far too short for the Jawas' tastes, Bidlo paid them and took the crude map they provided. Once he finished with Doon, he would see what had so excited the foul-smelling little skinks.

The next day Bidlo set out with two landspeeders, three Gamorreans, and a Quarren to explore the Dune Sea. Fortuna had asked some questions but Bidlo put him off with a story about Womp Rat hunting — Fortuna hated Womp Rat hunting.

Surprisingly, the Jawas' map was accurate; before long they found the twisted wreck of a stock light freighter. By the markings, the ship belonged to Captain Grizzid, a trader of some notoriety who dealt with Jabba. The damage looked pretty typical for a wrecked spaceship, except for a long rent in the hull that looked like it was made by something trying to escape.

Bidlo pulled his blaster nervously.

"Keep your eyes open . . . and remember: I want this thing alive," he warned, taking special care to tell the Gamorreans twice.

One of the Gamorreans approached the rent, cautiously holding his vibroax before him. Nothing jumped out. Bidlo ordered the Gamorrean to wait outside while the rest searched the interior.

Nothing. Nothing but a case of Aratech stun grenades and a modified cargo hold that had been refitted with energy bars.

Whatever had been in the cage must have been huge; the shield's energy couplers had been rigged to provide triple power to the containment system. Of course, all power had cut out when the freighter smashed into Tatooine.

The question was, what and where was the thing that had been in the cage?

A squeal of gleeful terror made Bidlo jump. He'd never heard a Gamorrean make that kind of noise; apparently, neither had the other Gamorreans. They went hesitantly back to the rent, and peered into the afternoon glare. Everything was quiet and the only sign of the guard was his ax — bent, broken, and lying in the sand.

They stepped carefully out of the ship, blasters and melee weapons ready.

Ortugg, one of the Gamorreans, was the first to see the nightmarish creature. It was more than two meters tall, a face full of dripping teeth, and long, sharp claws. "Rancor! Rancor!" Ortugg screamed, naming a fearsome Gamorrean demon; the other Gamorrean squealed and ran for the landspeeders.

Bidlo fired his blaster; the creature shrugged off the bolts and slashed the Quarren into bloody gobbets. Ortugg held his ground and hacked with his vibroax.

While the Gamorrean battled, Bidlo cracked open the case of stun grenades. The monster made short work of Ortugg; it flung the bleeding guard aside, and went for Bidlo. Terrified but thinking clearly, Bidlo grabbed the case and ducked into the wreck as Ortugg squirmed away, grinning.

Bidlo ran through the crumpled corridors looking for a place to make his stand. The Rancor, drooling excitedly, tore through the steel walls and reinforced bulkheads, always two steps behind until Bidlo had no place to run.

The Rancor approached, snapping its massive claws and grinding its toothy maw in anticipation. Backed against a solid wall, Bidlo lobbed a grenade directly into the Rancor's mouth, apparently making little impression on the Rancor. The beast growled and bashed its mighty fists into the already damaged deck, and *that's* what saved Bidlo's life.

Under the force of the Rancor's blows the deck collapsed, dropping Bidlo into a cargo hold below. Confused, the Rancor tore out the wall, vainly searching for his prey. Bellowing angrily, it walked forward and fell through the hole. The sudden change in altitude and scenery confused the beast even more. When confused, Rancors do what comes naturally. It started to rip, rend, and shred everything in its vicinity.

Bidlo quickly set one of his grenades to explode and dropped it in the case with the rest of them. With a mighty heave, he tossed the case at the Rancor and dove for cover. When the smoke from the explosion cleared, the Rancor was unconscious on top of the wrecked cargo and Bib Fortuna was calling from outside, demanding to know what was going on.

Three days later Bib and Bidlo gave the Rancor to Jabba for his birthday. Touched and amazed by such a gift, Jabba showed both of his men the full measure of his gratitude. The Twi'lek, Bib Fortuna, was promoted to chief lieutenant and major domo of Jabba's entire operation. Bidlo Kwerve received the signal honor of being the Rancor's first meal in his new home.



Ortugg's Letter Home (translated and paraphrased from Gamorrese)

Dear Venorra,

All honor to the clan. Hope the little ones are well and bashing each other around like anything. Jabba is a good boss. He has let me kill many prisoners. Much fun. These foreigners sure live in luxury; this place makes even our clanstead look like ungorr droppings. When you sold my contract, I was doubtful about this job, but now I'm happy. You should have seen my employment test! Jabba gave me the greatest beating I have ever had the privilege to survive.

I share a luxurious, vermin-infested cubicle (good for snacks!) with nine others. We get plenty of food and drink. We even get to fight a lot. But Jabba calls it "enforcing" and "protection." They gave me one of those blasters, but I use my battle-axe most of the time.

I even had the honor of being raked and torn by the Rancor! What fun I had almost getting killed! Now it lives under Jabba's palace and sometimes Jabba lets us watch when he feeds it. The Rancor is a wonderful pet! It is big, really big. It has big fangs and big claws! It knows how to fight, you bet. We just drop someone into the pit and watch the Rancor go. I get Morrtbumps just thinking about it!

Sorry, must go now. I have to go make moisture farmers pay protection. Send me a message sometime, huh? Tell everyone I said hi. And kill some of those stupid Rogak clanners!

Bye now,
Ortugg

All The Extras

Dash Rendar strode down the *Outrider's* entry ramp and into the immense repair bay deep beneath Byblos Starport Tower 214. Spare starship parts were heaped along the bay walls, and mechanics of all species and descriptions scurried around, sorting equipment or repairing the bulk freighter in the adjacent tech hangar.

A diminutive Sullustan approached, protective goggles perched on her forehead and tools bristling from every pocket on her worksuit. "Rendar," she called in a squeaky voice. "I've been expecting you."

"Yeah, Bolabo, I just got my hands on this new starship, and I was wondering if you could refit her," Rendar said.

"She's a beauty," Bolabo said, strolling around the *Outrider* with the keen eye of a professional technician. "One of those new Corellian YT-2400 jobs, right? I'd heard of them, but never seen one in person. You must have paid a pretty hefty sum for this one. Mint condition, too."

"Let's just say I have an old and generous Twi'lek uncle who appreciates my transport services," Rendar said. "I hope you have some hot systems to load on her."

"Sure, Rendar, I've been saving up for you," Bolabo said. "We've been keeping track of you. I knew you'd be coming back this way as soon as I heard you had your hands on this YT-2400. So I've got some appropriately 'hot' components we can load up. First we'll strip down the shield generators, install some power loop capacitors and reconstruct the entire array system. Then we'll drag out whatever cheapo hyperdrive the Corellians threw in there and fix you up with some new hyperdrive motivators my friends back on Sullust managed to smuggle out. Of course, we'll rip out those wimpy blaster cannons and put something with a bit more punch in the turrets, sling a concussion missile system beneath the cockpit, then rig it all together with one of these sleek new combat computers we lifted out of the Sienar Fleet Systems research tower right here on Byblos. You wouldn't believe how lax their security is. Then we coat the entire hull with this black-chrome sensor-deflector spray somebody found in a highly classified Imperial warehouse. Seems to work well on light freighters, although I don't have a lot left. And finally, we'll gut the ion drives and refit the bracings with these three military grade KonGar KGDefender ion engines. My, uh, 'purchasing agents' brought them out of the advanced engineering department of the Corulag Academy. Very fast. Very illegal. With all that junk in there you'll be making the Kessel Run in record time."

"Sounds great," Rendar said, a wary look in his eye. "What'll it cost me?"

"You're not going cheap on me, Dash, are you?" Bolabo chided. "Like I said, we keep track of a hotshot rocket jock like you. Heard you broke the record doing the Sevari Sidestep. Got out with a cargo hold full of carsunum spice. They pay prime credits for that stuff in the right markets."

"And I know the right markets," Dash bragged.

"That's the point. You got the best for your cargo, I'm sure." Bolabo removed a worn datapad from her jumpsuit pocket and began punching in numbers. "Let's say I give you the whole upgrade for ... this much." She handed the datapad to Rendar, and he gasped.

"You're outta your little Sullustan mind!"

"Sure, okay," Bolabo said, recomputing the numbers on the datapad. "I can always find another customer for those illegal KGDefender ion drives. Stealing those isn't like picking berries, now is it? Don't fret. I hear old Tru'eb's looking to replace the *Luudrian Star*'s failing excuse for a drive system ..."

"Okay, okay," Rendar conceded. "I'll pay." Bolabo was asking for practically all the credits he made off the carsunum spice. It was worth it. The *Outrider* would be so packed with extras that it would make even Han Solo jealous. "Where do I sign?"

Han Solo? Hot pilot, but I'll bet you the Crown Jewels of Alderaan that most of his speed records were Chewie's doing. Go on, ask Solo about that and watch how fast he shuts his big Corellian yap. Amazes me no one else has figured out his secret, but that's spacers for ya: Most of 'em would rather fly than think.
—Dash Rendar

Hapes: Ladies First

Part 1: Planet of the Amazons

Founded over four thousand millennia before the Battle of Yavin, the Hapes Consortium is a matriarchal society that remained isolated from galactic civilization until Princess Leia Organa and Han Solo helped forge a treaty between the worlds of the Hapes Cluster and the New Republic.

Before this groundbreaking diplomatic event, information about the Hapans and the goings-on behind the Transitory Mists -- a protective field of ionized space -- came from ancient documents or highly sensationalized "true"

holofilms and datafiles. Historians knew that the formation of the Hapes Cluster was quite strange, with 63 inhabited worlds in close proximity, and protected from invasion by the ionized particles and roaming stellar bodies of their outer region. The formation is so unusual, and so effective for protecting a small empire, that many speculate it may have been a grand celestial project from pre-Republic history like the Maw or the Corellian system. Surviving Old Republic records also confirmed that the Cluster was settled by Humans when pirates known as the Lorell Raiders found a few safe routes through the Mists and used it as a hideout, kidnapping the most beautiful Human females in the galaxy as mates. After the ancient Jedi defeated the Raiders, the women of Hapes declared a matriarchal monarchy and took charge of the entire cluster.

The surviving Lorell Raiders (soon to take on the moniker "Hapan pirates") were forced to take refuge in the Mists. To this day, Hapans are considered strikingly attractive by most beings, and the pirates often marry Hapan nobles, keeping the isolated gene pool vibrant. Other than that, the only evidence that the Consortium remained strong and in power were tales from survivors of incidents on the Hapan border, many of which were impossible to confirm. For the most part, the galaxy at large simply stayed out of Hapes' way, and vice versa. During the Rebellion Era, a greatly expanded Hapan military at the order of Hapan Queen Mother Ta'a Chume reinforced this noninterference.

Meanwhile, more popular entertainments dating all the way back to the Mandalorian Wars invariably portrayed the women of Hapes as bloodthirsty amazon warriors, lusty and powerful, kidnapping men to satisfy their craven desires and keeping them as cattle, and controlling the worlds of the Consortium with a mighty fleet of Battle Dragons. The last part was right.

One such datafile straddled the factual and the mythical. Planet of the Amazons: The Tale of the Pirate Ship Mourning Glory by Grov Bricker is indeed the actual memoir of a Corellian pirate captured by the Hapans not long before the destruction of the Death Star. This much was documented in official records. The details described by Bricker in his story, however, reflect the popularity of the "amazon" image of the Hapans, and is filled with lasciviously gratuitous elements that made it the bestselling datafile in the Empire for several months -- though few would admit they actually had a copy.

This week's excerpt describes Captain Bricker's first encounter with the Hapans. The pirate ship Mourning Glory has been pulled out of hyperspace in the middle of trying a new shortcut through the Inner Rim . . .

"Just look at that, would you?" I said. Alarm whistles and flashing lights were all over the board, and I quickly shut them down so I could think. I jammed a finger at the holo our droid Arf flashed in the empty air of the cockpit. "All the data this broken-down excuse for an astromech has on Hapes. Home of the Queen Mother. That's where she lives, it says. In the center of the Cluster."

"Right," said Kelan Faal. Arf emitted a gurgling groan that didn't sound very droidlike.

"We're at the edge of the Cluster, just outside the, what did you call it --"

"The Transitory Mists region," Kelan interrupted. My Hapan first mate didn't appear disturbed in the slightest. If anything, he looked amused. The astromech sputtered as the holo went out. Arf rolled over to a dead power socket and vainly attempted to draw power, but it looked like he'd be headed back to the shop soon. Assuming we got out of this alive.

I checked the sensors to make sure my eyes were getting the same information as the ship's working instruments. The *Mourning Glory* was not a small vessel, easily the match of the average smuggler or another pirate ship, but we were definitely outclassed, to say the least.

"I've taken this shortcut at least a dozen times," Kelan repeated for the fourth time. "We're well clear of any hyperspace interdicator mines that I know about."

"Well, something knocked us out of hyperspace, and took the hyperdrive with it. We're running on batteries. And I haven't taken your shortcut a dozen times. So what I want to know is," I said through clenched teeth, "if we're sectors away from the Queen of the Hapan Amazons, and this shortcut is completely safe, and the coordinates were programmed perfectly, and the Queen Mum never leaves her home base unless Hapes is going to war, why in Palpatine's name are we sitting parked in front of the *flagship of the Hapan fleet*?"

"That," Kelan said, "I can't tell you. But I think we're going to find out one way or the other."

Part 2: Return to the Planet of the Amazons

This week's pair of excerpts from pirate captain Grove Bricker's Rebellion-era memoir Planet of the Amazons: The Tale of the Pirate Ship Mourning Glory

describes the Hapan Queen Mother's personal starship, Star Home, from without and within.

The ship ahead of us filled every inch of transparisteel in the cockpit, despite its still-considerable distance from the wounded *Mourning Glory*. Space was only visible around the edges. What I could see looked like a floating, domed castle sitting improbably in the void of space, backlit by the turbulent swirls of the Transitory Mists. The five huge pylons that curved down from the round central portion's equator gave it the look of a feeding insect. Inside the translucent dome, I could see movement -- people, droids, and small repulsorcraft.

"It's not actually the flagship; that's a common misconception," I barely heard first mate Kelan say. "*Star Home* is the Queen Mother's personal transport. From what I hear, it could stand up to a Star Destroyer, but not much more than that. It's the size that makes him so imposing."

"Ships aren't 'hims.'"

"Sorry, force of habit," Kelan continued. "It's a Hapan thing. Whatever the case, it's pointless to panic. We're in their tractor beam, the engines are out, the droid's frotzed, and that's that."

"We've got to do something," I said. Though stories of the Hapan amazons and their treatment of "foreign" pirates were legendary, I'd never met anyone who'd been inside personally, except Kelan, who was Hapan himself. I trusted him, though. And he'd assured me that the stories of torture and execution were greatly exaggerated. Usually, they'd just blow intruders out of the sky, or let Kelan's kin in the Mists deal with them.

"Tell the crew to lock down the cargo and get ready to fight," I said. "Just in case."

"If you want to die with the crew," he said. "Not my idea of a good time. Look, Hapans don't usually wantonly murder pirates -- not Hapan pirates anyway. It drains the gene pool. This whole region's littered with Hapan pirate bases."

"Right. Your old stomping grounds. Which, I might remind you, is why I'm worried. We're not flying a Hapan flag of any kind."

"No, but you have a Hapan first mate," Kelan said. "And at the moment, my advice as first mate is this: give me command. Let me talk to them in Hapan. It's our only chance."

"You really think that'll be enough?" I asked. "If they check the ship's registration --"

"Against what?" Kelan replied. "The Hapans and the Empire don't share files."

"Do all Hapan pirates know so much about what the Hapans and the Imperials share?"

"Some do," he answered.

At that moment, the ship lurched as the tractor operators on the massive, two-and-a-half kilometer vessel focused the beam. We picked up inevitable speed as the *Glory* fell into an artificial gravity well centered on the underbelly of *Star Home*. As my ship was dragged unwillingly beneath the behemoth, I saw two sliding doors open to reveal what looked like a cavernous hangar bay above. We weren't wriggling out of this one.

"All right, Captain," I said. "Don't screw this up."

"Grov, trust me. While we've got time, you should go tell the crew --"

"Tell them what?" a dusky female voice purred from behind my left shoulder. I shivered as Xanai Sowan's fingers came to rest on my shoulder, then winced as my Twi'lek engineer dug four fingernails into my flesh. Guess I'd be bunking in the cockpit again, or a Hapan brig, if I slept at all, and if *Star Home* didn't blow us to smithereens, which I had to admit was looking less likely.

Torture, then. And no Twi'lek to keep me company. Great.

Xanai gasped as her attention left my shoulder and she saw the underside of the massive ship. "What the frotz is that, Captain?"

"Come on, Xan," I said, "I'm heading below decks. You can help me give a little speech to the crew. I'll explain everything on the way, but we don't have much time." I threw a jaunty half-salute to Kelan and guided the Twi'lek by the elbow to the ladder leading belowdecks. "But first, don't call me 'Captain' for a while."

The Mourning Glory was soon drawn into the large hangar bay built into the underbelly of Star Home. As a result of communications between the Hapan "Captain" Kelan Faal and an unseen female officer on the mighty castle-ship, a violent standoff was avoided. Most of the crew was confined to the Glory, but Faal and his "first mate" Bricker were taken by a band of amazon warriors and led away, unarmed but unbound. After a less-than-polite description of his captors, their scant garments, and theoretical recreational activities among members of the Hapan military, Bricker continued . . .

As we emerged under the great dome of *Star Home*, we no longer stood within a starship. This was a small city living under a crystalline night sky, elegantly beautiful in design and utterly bizarre in composition. Buttresses and walls made of what looked like actual *stone* -- on a spaceship? -- comprised a towering central castle. Smaller stone buildings, and smaller domes, ringed the central structure, visible just over the artificial horizon. Our alluring captors marched Kelan and me up a cobblestone path in silence, striking us roughly when we dared to open our mouths. They took us past an incongruously chaotic flower garden that grew up around a small lake, and into the castle through a small side passage a dozen meters from the obvious main entrance.

We were in near darkness again, and I heard the whine of microelectronics as the Hapan amazons activated night-vision goggles. They led us along for at least a half-kilometer, and then we came to a halt before an arched metal door built into the stone. The door slid aside and I was momentarily blinded, but within a few seconds I could make out the outlines of a grand vaulted hall. A maroon carpet lay before us, ending in a high-backed golden throne upon which sat Ta'a Chume. On either side, two dozen armored Hapan amazons stood at attention, menace in their shapely eyes.

"Welcome, gentlemen," the Queen of the Amazons purred. She was a diamond among jewels -- her physical beauty unmatched, her bearing as cold as ice. A narrow golden band that looked expensive rested atop her brow. The form-fitting gown she wore was made of expensive-looking material that changed colors in the artificial sunlight within the hall, and glimmered around a stunning figure as she stood and inclined her head, briefly, at each of us. The Queen drew aside her translucent veil and continued. "You are now guests of the Hapes Consortium. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will answer all of my questions, and the questions of my subordinates, or you will die. When I learn what I want to know, you may even be allowed to go free. I am the queen mother of the amazons of Hapes, Ta'a Chume, and until I say otherwise, you belong to me."

I opened my mouth to reply, but Kelan clamped a palm over my lips and shook his head.

"I see my Hapan kinsman understands," Ta'a Chume smiled like a predator. "Follow his lead, pirate, and we'll get along famously."

Part 3: Beneath the Planet of the Amazons

As described in Grov Bricker's controversial Rebellion-era memoir Planet of the Amazons: The Tale of the Pirate Ship Mourning Glory, Bricker and his captive crew arrived at Hapes after a three-week journey. Though they were allowed a surprising amount of freedom within the crystal domes of the massive castle-ship, the Corellian Bricker and his Hapan first mate Kelan Faal left Star Home in manacles, while the Mourning Glory was impounded and the rest of her crew shipped to a prison moon. Bricker and Faal soon found themselves chained to the stone walls of a torch-lit dungeon, deep beneath the Fountain Palace on Hapes.

I wish I'd seen how that huge ship got through the mined, pirate-ridden Transitory Mists (and I know pirate-ridden, being a pirate myself). If we were going to find the crew and get out of this cursed sector, we'd need a way out.

Not that I really expected us to be going anywhere anytime soon, I didn't even know which moon the crew was taken to. I'm just an optimist by nature. But even an optimist has to recognize when he's bound in cold iron. The blindfold kept me from seeing how we got here, but it was definitely underground, judging from the long 'lift ride. We both hung with our arms above our heads and our feet barely able to touch to floor, chained to the wall. We were in a small 10-by-10-meter room that looked like it was based on the setting of a hundred ancient Coruscanti romance holos. My wrists were starting to chafe, and Kelan Faal was for some reason whistling a jaunty melody.

"Kelan, what are you doing?"

"Whistling, first mate Bricker."

"You can stop that now. It seems our little ruse didn't work."

"Sorry, captain," Kelan said. "I'm not worried, though."

"Not worried?!" I almost screamed, and then lowered my voice. "Not worried? We're in a *dungeon*, man. When *will* you start worrying?"

"Just a feeling," Kelan explained. "I've got to trust my own instincts. That's why you hired me, right?"

"Right," I sighed, and pointlessly tried to wriggle free of the iron manacles for the thousandth time. At that moment, a heavy metal door swung inward and bright yellow light flooded our dank chamber. The incongruously modern passageway outside made me wonder if the entire thing was a hallucination. The yellow glow cast the Queen Mother's shapely form in silhouette, and then without a word artificial lights I hadn't seen before raised within the dungeon and I was able to see her clearly.

Ta'a Chume was as cold and beautiful as ever. It was too bad she was probably going to kill me.

To my surprise, she went straight to my Hapan partner without speaking to or even acknowledging my existence. What the frotz?

After examining Kelan Faal like he was going to be the entrée at this evening's royal feast, Ta'a Chume smiled. I really hated when she did that. Kelan simply smiled back. "Yes?" he asked.

Ta'a Chume drew back a hand and slapped him without blinking, never once dropping her smile. "Kelan Faal, is it?"

Kelan's expression grew dark, and the smile left his face. "My name is Kelan Faal. I am a Hapan."

"You are a pirate, as are all that dwell in the Transitory Mists," the Queen replied. She sighed, and her dress shifted in a way that made me temporarily forget that she held me prisoner. "Yet you do not dwell in the Mists anymore, do you? You have chosen to leave the bosom of mother Hapes and strike out in the galaxy."

"What of it?" Kelan asked. I could see he didn't have any better idea where this was going than I did.

"I seek information about one of your . . . kinsman. Another Hapan pirate, who has also left the galaxy behind. My son, Isolder." Ta'a Chume smiled again, and a shiver went down my spine. "Surely, the galaxy is not that large. Surely, you have heard of another Hapan pirate, like yourself, who is not content to stay in the Mists. Surely, you value your own life enough to tell me." She was no longer looking at Kelan like a piece of meat -- he *was* a handsome fellow, I

admit -- but instead almost appeared . . . concerned? Yes, concern showed behind the icy threat of her gaze, but only when she looked at Kelan.

"I don't know what you're talking about," my first mate replied. "I've never heard of another Hapan pirate working the same spacelanes as myself and the captain, here, but surely, it *is* a much bigger galaxy than you think. You should leave the Cluster once in a while, your majesty."

She stared long and hard into Kelan's eyes, then scowled. "Very well. I *will* have you executed if you do not reveal his location. You shall spill your blood on Hapan soil, pirate, and the women of Hapes will rejoice, because of the crimes they will be told you have committed. You have until dawn tomorrow to change your mind."

Tired of being ignored, I decided to try to bargain with her. "Surely you don't mean both of us, your majesty? I'm just a simple cargo hauler, no matter what you may have been told. If you release me and my crew and let us go on our way, I assure you I won't rest until I find your son."

For the first time, Ta'a Chume looked at me, and I instantly regretted opening my mouth. She smiled that cold, enigmatic smile again, and my blood turned to ice. "Kelan, needless to say, your captain shall share your fate. Until dawn."

With that, she turned and stalked back through the door, which clanged shut behind her as the lights once again dimmed and plunged us into darkness.

"Kelan, are you sure you don't know who she's talking about?" I asked.

"I'm sure," he said. "But I'm also sure we're going to get out of this. An execution, a public execution, can only happen in front of the Fountain Palace. That means there's still a chance. Just . . . bear with me for the night, Captain. She won't kill us. Trust me."

"Like I have a choice," I muttered. "You picked a hell of a time to start acting like a Corellian, Kelan."

Part 4: Escape from the Planet of the Amazons

Though portrayed as militaristic and cruel in the best-selling Rebellion Era datafile Planet of the Amazons: The Tale of the Pirate Ship Mourning Glory, the laws and mores of Rebellion-era Hapan society were eventually found to be not unlike most of those in the Old Republic. Slavery was outlawed, pirates and

smugglers were prosecuted, and in some cases crimes against the state were punishable by public execution. Unlike the Old Republic, however, "crimes against the state" could be instantly redefined by the state herself -- the Queen Mother.

In our final excerpt from Grov Bricker's memoir, he and his Hapan first mate Kelan Faal face execution unless they reveal the whereabouts of Prince Isolder, the Queen's son. At dawn, unfamiliar amazon guards in dress regalia arrive and lead the chained pirates to an open-air amphitheater near the Fountain Palace...

Having gotten familiar with *Star Home*, I wasn't surprised to see the elegant design of the Fountain Palace, or the way it fit into the rest of the capital city like a jewel. Its size was another matter -- the version on the Queen's giant ship is built to scale, as it turns out. The real thing must have stood two kilometers away from the amphitheater where Kelan and I awaited our fate, yet it still filled the skyline behind the noisy crowd and cast a dark, gloomy shadow.

The guards hadn't blindfolded us or gagged us, so Kelan had time to explain a public execution on the long walk from the dungeon. He still seemed disturbingly jaunty for a man being lead to his death.

The execution would be carried out by the gun of command, an incredibly rare weapon built on the Consortium world Charubah. According the Kelan, it pretty much turned someone into a zombie, willing to do whatever was commanded of them. The executioner would shoot the condemned man (it was illegal to execute a female on Hapes under any circumstances) with the gun of command, hand him an ordinary blaster, and order him to blow his own head off. It was brutal, but sounded like a pretty effective deterrent to pirates or lawbreakers that dared venture this far into the sector.

We waited almost half an hour on a raised platform in the center of the amphitheater as the audience filed in, some somber, some chatting like it was another day at the Podraces. Finally, a hush fell over the assembly as the Queen's shuttle settled into the dusty ground next to the platform. A ramp lowered and Ta'a Chume descended, accompanied by a dozen dressed-up guards and another dozen robed retainers, all of whom wore hoods. The crowd roared, and the Queen Mother raised a hand to acknowledge her people as the entourage mounted the platform and arranged themselves in a circle around us.

There wasn't a male in the crowd, or among the retainers and guards. Just us two pirates.

"Women of Hapes," Ta'a Chume boomed through a comlink that must have been hidden somewhere on her embroidered robes of state, "We bring before you two men -- pirates -- who have repeatedly violated our borders, taken Hapan women as slaves, and still refuse to accept Hapan justice. We have declared them enemies of the state. You are here to witness their ultimate punishment." She wasn't kidding the day before about the crimes the crowd would be *told* we'd committed. I'd never run slaves in my life.

"According to our ancient traditions, the condemned have the right to ask twelve noblewomen for mercy. We assure them there is none to be found." At that, the Queen took a step backward as the hooded figures advanced.

I still hadn't seen the executioner, though I wasn't sure how I would recognize him. Or her.

"Ladies," I began, "I wish to, er, beg the mercy of the . . . court?"

"Let me handle this, Captain," Kelan said. He began to speak to them in the mellifluous Hapan language, words as elegant as the palace that loomed on the skyline.

He spoke for fifteen minutes, eloquently, passionately. Not one of the well-shaped figures under the robes moved a muscle. Finally the Queen Mother declared our arbitration period up, and the robed figures returned to their places.

"Very well," Ta'a Chume said. "You have had your last chance. More than one, in fact. We do not relish giving this order, but give it we shall. Kelan Faal, still nothing to say for yourself?"

"This is ridiculous," Kelan replied. I could have punched him. This was his plan? Insulting the Queen Mother?

"So be it," Ta'a Chume said. She nodded to the nearest guard, who I saw was wearing two blasters on her belt. *There* was the executioner I'd been looking for. One blaster appeared to be gold-plated, the other quite ordinary, even primitive by Imperial standards.

With a grimace she couldn't hide, the warrior unsnapped her holster and drew the golden weapon, aiming it at my first mate. It almost offended me, I have to admit, even under the circumstances. Who was the captain around here, anyway? This entire misadventure had taken a toll on my ego.

"Take aim," Ta'a Chume said.

The crowd went silent. But as the amazon Queen opened her mouth to continue, one of the robed women suddenly threw her hood back and drew a second golden blaster.

Before anyone could react, she tossed it to Kelan, who caught it in two unbound hands. I hadn't been watching Kelan's hands any more than the women on the platform, and he'd somehow unlocked his manacles as he pleaded our case. The woman shouted something to Kelan in Hapan that I didn't understand, but I did recognize one word: "Isolder."

"Thank you, Lady Elliar," Kelan said with a slight bow of the head. The guards, even the one holding a gun on my Hapan friend, were frozen, uncertain.

Ta'a Chume's eyes blazed. "Elliar, you've signed your own death warrant," the Queen Mother growled.

Kelan raised the gun of command and pointed it right at Ta'a Chume's head. He pulled the trigger without a word, and a weird distortion flashed from the muzzle and struck the Queen. Her blazing eyes dilated, and she slumped visibly.

"Shut up, mother," he said, "and order the release of Captain Bricker and the crew of the *Mourning Glory*. Immediately. After that, why don't you just stare into the sky for awhile?"

In a dazed voice, Ta'a Chume did just that. The guards hesitated for a moment, but at the prodding of Lady Elliar, they hustled over and undid my manacles. It seemed that no one dared contradict the word of the Queen Mother, even when it was obvious they weren't exactly *her* words.

"Kelan," I said. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Captain," he replied. "I never thought she'd really go through with it. You probably guessed that my name isn't Kelan Faal."

"Really."

He nodded lamely. "Really."

"Isolder, I presume?"

"I knew those Hapan language tapes would start working eventually. Captain, could you excuse me for a second?"

Kelan -- Isolder -- seized the comlink from his mother's lapel and turned to the assembled crowd. "People of Hapes! The inequities of our society --"

Isolder suddenly stopped and stiffened.

Ta'a Chume had not remained stunned for long. Elliar slumped in a heap on the platform, disabled while I was watching Kelan. How Ta'a Chume had moved so fast, I still don't know. The amazon Queen pressed the guard's gun of command into my first mate's back; her other hand held one sparking, severed end of a cable connected to the PA system. The loudspeakers played only static, and the crowd remained stunned and silent.

"Chume'da," Ta'a Chume said quietly as she pulled the trigger. "Leave this life and come home."

There was nothing I could do. Isolder's eyes glassed over instantly as electromagnetic energy shocked his nervous system, and his jaw went a slack. The comlink slipped from his hands. He turned to Ta'a Chume and nodded. "Mother," he said as he walked to her side.

"Kelan," I said, "Come on, pal. She shook it off. You shake it off." Out of ideas, I snatched up a dropped blaster and aimed it at Ta'a Chume. "Listen, lady --"

The royal guards finally took action. The nearest lunged from the side and grasped me in a velvet bear hug that in any other circumstances might have been extremely pleasant. The blaster dropped again to the cold, polished stone.

"I think not," Ta'a Chume replied, her voice no longer echoing within the amphitheatre but still cold and powerful. "I could still have you executed, but that moment seems to have passed. I could use this weapon to order you to leave and forget all you have seen, but eventually the memories would come

back. I could imprison you forever, but frankly, your Corellian stench overwhelms me."

"So . . ." I began.

"So you shall be returned to your ship, pirate, where your crew will be waiting. The Hapes Consortium is not without mercy. Our favored son has returned to us, and you were instrumental, whether you chose to be so or not. By the time the Chume'da recovers, you will be on your way out of the Hapan system. You will meet a Battle Dragon that will escort you through the Transitory Mists, and Hapan eyes will not light on you again. If they do, your lives and your ship are forfeit."

"Your highness," I said, stunned a little bit myself. "My ship needs a first mate. If you are merciful --"

"Do not push your luck, Corellian," Ta'a Chume said. "Guards, take him to the hangar."

As the amazon women dragged me away, I got one last look at my friend Kelan, who stood hovering over the unconscious Lady Elliar. He was staring like an idiot, but a slight frown of concern was etched into his daze. I pitied and envied him at the same time. But mostly, I really wanted to get my hands on a gun of command, and get the frotz off of this planet.

I'm not without diplomatic skills myself. Surely, one of these guards would understand the concept of bargaining.

Korriban: Planet of Lost Souls

Part 1: Haunted Hideout

The following documents transcribe a set of recordings recovered by trusted Jedi Academy researchers sent by Luke Skywalker to the ancient Sith homeworld of Korriban, a dark place of unimaginable evil. They comprise the only evidence ever found regarding the disappearance of the pirate freighter Jynni's Virtue. Time codes on the log tapes, some sections of which were unrecoverable due to damage from age, indicate they were made just before the Battle of Yavin.

Controversy surrounds the discovery. Many historians dismiss the tapes as

frauds, since they were found sealed inside the wall of a Sith Lord's tomb. According to a battery of tests, that tomb, belonging to a Sith Lord named Dathka Graush, had been constructed over 7,000 years earlier.

Some Jedi dispute the Jynni's Virtue logs for different reasons. It seems inconceivable to many of Skywalker's students that any simple pirates could have found and infiltrated Korriban during that time, since Palpatine had surely discovered the world since then. But others argue that ample evidence suggests the ship didn't just crash because of a hyperdrive malfunction - - it came under fire from unseen enemies, as well. It is logical to assume that Imperial ships operating with cloaking shields attacked Jynni's Virtue. Why they did not pursue the ship is apparent from the content of the logs.

The shipwreck of the pirate ship Jynni's Virtue and the remains of her crew, if any, have never been found. The recording transcribed here was dated exactly six months before the destruction of the first Death Star.

Region: Outer Rim (Corporate Sector)

Jynni's Virtue Ship's Log

Captain Naz Felyood Recording

Babbnod thinks I'm crazy to bother keeping this log, but I say it will keep me sane. And it's a sign we're not going to be here long. Captain's got to set an example. Besides, charging the recorder - - and our weapons - - keeps the generators on the ship from overheating. The engines shouldn't be running on the ground like this, even at low power, but I can't take the chance that she'll die on us altogether. So for now, we run the engines to power the systems. It's dangerous, but the crew knew this wasn't going to be a pleasure cruise when they signed on. Piracy isn't for the easily frightened.

[DAMAGE] picked up an Imperial scouting patrol near [DAMAGE] told them we had to jump whether the calculations were done or [DAMAGE] don't consider it running, not one bit. I made a strategic decision. We jumped.

The astromech exploded, which is when we lost Nrross. Trandoshans might be able to grow arms back, but [DAMAGE] to miss him, and I'll miss his skills as an intimidation enhancement. Wasn't bright, but he was a yes man. Janah

took what was left of astronavigation. She said she put us in the Corporate Sector, which made as much sense as anything - - I'd asked the droid for the fastest jump out of the line of fire. He's lucky he blew up.

[DAMAGE] fire from out of nowhere. I mean that literally. There was simply nothing on scanners, nothing to target, blast it, except their shots. And whatever they were, they weren't staying in one place long enough to draw a bead. Maybe they had cloaks of some kind, which means they've got a lot of money. Whatever planet this was that just popped up in front of us was heavily defended.

Babb says she found something in the library computer that might give her some idea where we are, if not who shot us down. Some ancient star charts I'd picked up at an Outer Rim junk dealer were actually the key. Until then, we've got to get the normal ship's systems back up so we can stop running the engines, or we're going to be as dead as this hunk of [DAMAGE] as well go see what's out there. I think she might be right. And I don't think our mysterious friends up in orbit are going to leave us all alone down here for long.

[LOG ENDS]

Part 2: Valley of Darkness

Captain Felyood and his pirate band ended up staying on Korriban longer than intended. The following entry, one of two that was better preserved than the others, was recorded during a reconnaissance expedition conducted by the Corellian captain, his Twi'lek first mate Babbnod, and Deksi Fivvl, Felyood's longtime engineer and an amateur historian. It's apparent from the log entry that the old Aqualish male was more the former than the latter, since the "facts" he provided Captain Felyood contradict much of what is now understood by Jedi researchers.

Jynni's Virtue Ship's Log

Captain Naz Felyood Recording

Korriban. I'm finally here. The crazy old woman was right. It boggles the mind. Who ever thought it was real? Hell, who'd even heard of it? Well, me, apparently, but it was news to most everyone else except Babbnod. I hadn't realized she'd been awake during that sabacc game on Nar Shaddaa. For that

matter, it had been five years ago. A lot of blood has been shed and treasure taken in that time. I'd almost forgotten.

Babb and me, we played a few hands with one of those hooded mysterious types, one of those games that even closing time can't put a stop to. This old woman - - at least, that's what the voice sounded like - - told me I would come here someday. Told me it was a tombworld, a place where "evil lived," whatever that means. But she also said I was going to find something incredibly valuable here. The most valuable treasure I'd ever lay eyes on, the old crone had said. Then she promptly won the pot and disappeared. I never saw her again and had completely written the old crone off. Until now. This place is very real.

'Course, she never told me the place was a Sith tombworld. Or that I was going to get here completely by accident, and it was going to cost me my ship. But if what I'm looking at right now is real, I'll be able to buy a thousand ships with the loot that's buried in this place.

Deksi says something's got the survey holocam malfunctioning - - some kind of planetary energy field. Or maybe the thing's finally given up the ghost. I'm going to describe what I'm seeing for posterity, and hope we've got the thing working soon. If we can't display holofootage of where the loot comes from, we won't be able to ask top cred. Hell, I might even contact a museum or two, once I'm set for life.

The Virtue came down about two kilometers north of a valley that was showing some faint power readings. Probably some ancient security systems still functioning, we reckoned, or maybe some natural power source that would help get our girl up and running again. We spotted what looked like an old road headed back that way, and left the crew working on the ship while we went to see what we could see. And what we saw... well, words barely do it justice.

First, a word about Korriban: Imagine that Coruscant had been abandoned for some reason, just left completely vacant for five millennia. That's Korriban, a world covered in mountains made of eroded structures and weathered temples built into the planet's bedrock. The world itself, at least the immediate area around the Virtue, is a ruin. A tomb.

Listen to me, waxing poetical when I should be specific, as long as the

holocam's still not working, Deksi. The valley we saw was enormous. Measurements indicate it runs at least a hundred kilometers distant, though it could be more; the astromech's sensors haven't been upgraded in a while. From where I'm standing, the canyon floor is a 1,200-meter drop, which follows a southward slope as the walls rise. The walls are lined with stonework, covered in carvings Babbod says are... well, I can hardly believe it, but she says they're some kind of protective magic. Sith magic.

I'm guessing the Sith weren't a modest people, judging from the sculptures and reliefs lining the canyon walls. They're all different, and the scale doesn't give me any idea how big these people really were. But I admit I'm glad they're not around anymore. They give me [DAMAGE]

It's getting late and Babb says we're needed back at the ship. Some kind of power drain's hitting the engines, now, and it's looking like we might be here a while.

[REMAINING LOG IRRETRIEVABLE]

Part 3: The Dark Lord's Heart

This log entry from the lost pirate ship Jynni's Virtue is the last made by Captain Felyood. Despite the captain's claim that it had been only a few days since the ship crashed on Korriban, the recording bears a date stamp indicating that Captain Felyood ventured into the Valley of Golg almost two standard months after making his first log entry. Jedi Academy researchers have no explanation for the discrepancy, though some claim (off the record) that the Dark Side energy on the Sith tombworld may affect the flow of time itself on Korriban.

This tape was in the worst shape, and the casing bore considerable carbon scoring attributed to no known weapon.

Jynni's Virtue Ship's Log

Captain Naz Felyood Recording

Day three of our extended stay on Korriban. The engines have given out, but Deksi says he's cobbled together a simple generator using parts from the

ship. That should keep our power cells charged - - and, more importantly, the blasters. I've ordered everyone to make sure they're armed, even in the [DAMAGE]

Last night, I suspect something approached the perimeter around our camp. [DAMAGE] of glowing red eyes, but Babbnod said I was nuts. Claimed it was light reflecting from the moons. Could have been, I suppose. Maybe she just needs to tell herself that. Still, some wandering predator ain't going to keep me from exploring this valley. I left the crew back at the ship, and Deksi managed to find some climbing equipment in the stores. I'll resume this recording once I'm on the [DAMAGE]

[DAMAGE] roughest climb I've had since my last visit to the Bouncin' Yunka. I lost the sun halfway down - - not that there's much to the sun here. The glowlamp died about the same time, so I'm burning a chemical flare. The light makes some of these carvings look - - well, it's my log, so I'll say it: The things look like they're moving. But that's crazy. I see what looks like an entrance nearby, coordinates... 55 mark 302. I'm going to [DAMAGE]

Should have seen the cracks in the flooring. I'm in some kind of large, cavernous room. Hear that echo? This place is huge. The light from the flare can't reach the ceiling or the back walls, so I can't say for sure how far this thing runs. Make a note: If Deksi can't get the holocam working soon, he takes a permanent pay [DAMAGE]

Uh, resuming recording... Something's making noise in here, but I can't spot it. When I do, I'm putting a blaster bolt into it.

I've counted fourteen individual shrines with pictograms of different Sith wizards mounted on the wall above them. When I come back here with Jolsz and Farbor, we'll try lighting one, but right now... Call me superstitious, but I don't feel like letting the wizards know I'm here any more than necessary. There are eyes in here, watching me. I thought it [DAMAGE]

[DAMAGE] but I think no animal could have survived down here for so long. This place is sealed tighter than... well, a crypt. It looks like the biggest shrine yet is up ahead. Makes sense the most valuable stuff would be up there, so I might as well start at the top. I think I can use the climbing spikes to get the sarcophagus opened [DAMAGE] a few spares for the climb back up. And the lid's halfway off. Time to take a closer [DAMAGE] in there.

I've got something. No, lots of somethings. A sword... that'll fit in the pack... an amulet, some kind of pyramid-shaped crystal that feels warm to the touch - - maybe it's some kind of power cell treated to work in this environment. There's also a jewel as big as my fist sitting where this fellow's heart should be. Wish I could read these inscriptions, or provide an image for [DAMAGE]

[DAMAGE] there? Come out, I'm armed. Step into the light, damn it. [Sounds of scuffling and recorder dropping to ground] Yeah? What makes you think you have anything I want? [Several minutes of silence not attributed to damage. Sound of metal on stone. The following speaker cannot be identified by Jedi researchers.]

UNKNOWN VOICE: Zhol kash dinora. Ja'ak. Vexok savaka. [Translated from ancient Sith: "It is done. I am free. Wake up, there is work to do."]

Part 4: The Sith Shall Rise Again

This pair of short log entries from the lost ship Jynni's Virtue, authenticated by Academy experts, features not the voice of Naz Felyood but instead that of his first mate, the Twi'lek female Babbnod Luroon. The date stamp indicates the recording was made five months after planet fall, but as heard in earlier tapes, Luroon claims the time since the ship crashed on Korriban had been much shorter.

Archivist's note: The case holding this log tape also contained a small ring of traditional Twi'lek design and had somehow sustained considerable acid damage.

Jynni's Virtue Ship's Log

First Mate Babb Luroon Recording

The Captain's been gone for three days, and I've officially called off the search. We can't do any [DAMAGE] and the attacks have gotten more frequent. Still can't tell where they're coming from without risking losing another one of the crew, and I'm not willing to do that. It's bad enough we've lost the Captain, Sev, and Derec. And Nrross. Sweet, stupid Nrross. I

shouldn't say this on the log, but I don't care anymore - - if the Captain comes back, I might kill him myself. [DAMAGE] believe he didn't tell me how long it had been since he'd restocked the ship's emergency rations. [Sound of pounding from outside the ship] I'll continue this later. Sounds like they're making another run on the [DAMAGE]

[DAMAGE] should have to die that way [DAMAGE] torn apart. Then they got right back up and joined the attackers. [DAMAGE] can no longer believe we are going to survive this. The dead walk [DAMAGE]

We're down to a pair of blaster rifles at half charge. I've given them to Churl and Rutigar and put them on sniper duty, but from the sound of things, they're going through the charges fast.

Jynni's Virtue Ship's Log, Additional

First Mate Babb Luroon Recording

[DAMAGE] ordered Deksi to see if he can rig the generator to blow the ship's engines. If we're not getting off this rock, no one is. Felyood was a fool. This place hasn't got any treasure. These things attacking us - - at first, we thought they were some kind of natives, but they're not. This sounds insane, but [DAMAGE] dead, but they don't seem to know it yet. The reason I know they're dead? Because I saw Sev and Derec out there. Sev's arm was gone, and half his face looked chewed away, but on he came, trying to take my head off with a rusty sword. Derec was in a little better shape, but nothing living should have been walking around with a hole that big in his gut. The blaster bolts I spent putting them down were well spent.

A shot to the head seems to be the only [DAMAGE] and Rutigar are dead. I took their heads with a vibroblade before they could get back up. I've left Deksi and Bunk to finish rigging our little surprise, and I'm going topside to see if I can hold them off. One way or another, this is going to [DAMAGE]

Part 5: Sole Survivor

While technically not part of the Jynni's Virtue log recordings, the following brief written message was found with the tapes. Whether this means the documents were hidden in the 7,000 year-old tomb by the writer

has been the cause of much debate in Jedi academic circles since their discovery. It is believed to represent the last words of Captain Naz Felyood.

The first part was written in Basic, with a normal stylus on ancient parchment, which was itself dated to an age of 7,000 years. The second part may not be a message but a prayer of some sort. It is the translation of ancient Sith runes that lined the border of the parchment, written in Human blood.

Part 1: Basic

Good night, sweet Jynni. You got the last laugh, all right. This old treasure hunter found the treasure. And just like you said, it's been the end of me.

They're all gone. Every last one of them. Sev. Rutigar. Deksi. Everyone.

Babb. When we made the big score, we were supposed to settle down somewhere on the Outer Rim, live like royalty. Guess that ain't going to happen. But I know why she had to do it. I know because I remember everything.

I was there when the Virtue went up like a Deep Core nova. I stood in the wash of heat and radiation, and saw the things I'd called my army vaporized in an instant. I was a god, until the Heart was taken from me.

If I find the Heart again, it will ruin me. Yet I know I won't stop looking, the way I know I won't stop breathing. Graush won't let me stop until I find him.

The Heart. That reminds me. If you find this, go. Leave this place now. Some things should stay dead. This planet should stay dead. I should stay dead. But something tells me an old friend isn't going to let me. I can hear him calling my name, and I'm not going to be able to resist. So go while you can. Don't wait until dark.

Forgive me.

Part 2: Sith Runes

Dathka, my friend. Dathka, save me.

I did as you asked. I called the lost ones, and set them on the betrayers. Dathka, my friend. Where did you go? Did you leave with the lost ones?

They took your Heart. Took it from me, and now I cannot hear you. Did I displease you? The lost ones don't know you. How can they?

I must find the ones who survived. They have your power; they are survivors. Like I am a survivor. I must find you, Dathka, my friend. We will be strong again. We will feast on their hearts, and the blood of the weak shall wash pure the dead stone.

They destroyed virtue, and the lost ones are scattered. But you are out there, Dathka.

Dathka, my friend. Dathka, our master.

Naz Felyood, Lost Soul

When first mate Babbnod Luroon successfully blew the engines of the Jynni's Virtue, the explosion devastated the surrounding area and destroyed most of the Korriban Sith zombies laying siege to the ship - - as well as the crew, of course.

Now their cursed captain wanders Korriban, seeking the Heart of Graush. The ancient sorcery of Dathka Graush and the residue of the Sith Lord left in Naz Felyood's body has brought the Corellian's aging to a standstill. So though he is in all respects a Human, he will never be allowed to die - - and someday, he and the Heart of Graush may be reunited.

Picutorion Viewed From the Top

Commodore Bevven and High Colonel Drost were viewing the progress of the battle on Picutorion, engaged in a strained discussion about whether to deploy TIE fighters in support of the surface action. Elements of the armor battalion of Tensiger's 6th regiment had penetrated the perimeter of a tracking station, but the Rebels were still giving heated resistance, and nearly every Y-wing flying was attacking in support of the tracking station.

Bewen, fearing that the Y-wings might decide to attack the fleet, wanted to send the TIEs in waves which would engage a few Y-wings quickly and then return, holding the majority of the TIEs in reserve. Drost knew that picking off just a few Y-wings at a time would doom the troopers making the assault, probably causing the failure of the attack.

Bewen turned away from Drost, facing his lead controller squarely. "Lieutenant, order all squadrons to attack along the parabola programmed in. They are to stay in tight formation during the initial attack, and to return to the fleet as soon we have pulled within four arc seconds of the return path. Release on my mark."

"Yes sir!"

"May I interrupt for a moment, Commodore?" Bewen turned to face the man who had been watching him on the bridge. Bewen could not remember his name. Barezz, perhaps? The one from ISB.

"If you must," said the Commodore.

"This is for your ears also, Colonel," said the man. "We have been monitoring the progress of the offensive and have noted the elements which have actually penetrated the tracking station include two tagged as sensi-

tive."

Colonel Drost moved closer, stepping within a polite distance. He eyed the ISB man cautiously.

"The two, a Captain Ganig and a Sergeant Stecker, are both inside the station. COMPNOR made each famous after the Battle of Sagma, but since then their casual observation of doctrine has come to light. If they take this station, COMPNOR will again make them heroes."

"What is your point, Barezz?" asked the colonel. The ISB man snapped his eyes toward him. The colonel met the gaze.

"My point, colonel, is that for propaganda purposes, dead heroes are nearly as good live ones. And dead heroes cannot defect to the Rebellion."

"Do your sources indicate that they are thinking of defecting?"

"No," admitted Barezz, "but we are certain that a trooper named Linds is a Rebel sympathizer. He has been in contact with each man. I do not know if we can take such a risk. Delay the starfighter support until the Rebels have killed Ganig and Stecker. Then send in the support needed to dispose of the Y-wings."

Bewen looked at Drost. They were his TIE fighters, but they were Drost's men. The colonel nodded curtly.

"How long could your men hold out in their present position, colonel?" Bewen asked.

"Normally I would say less than three minutes. They are good. I would guess seven," said Drost.

"Controller, widen the parabola for 10 minutes to target. On my mark."

"Yes sir!"

The Assault on Protazk

The mighty repulsortank slid down the ramp of the landing barge, sending dust plumes high into the air.

Gortz peered through his viewport and cursed. "Another dirt-ball world. Hey, sarge! How come we get all the good jobs?"

Sergeant Arbmbab flicked a few switches on the command console and leaned over the turret to speak to his driver. "We're expendable, that's why. You don't think they'd send in the white armor boys while they've got us do ya? Besides, it'll be a push over, Rancor's leading us himself. Okay, let's roll, we've got a job to do."

The huge metal tank thrummed as Gortz cut in the repulsortank drives. The tank hung there, momentarily suspended above the flat landscape before shooting forward in formation with the other tanks in the squadron. "Keep your eyes peeled, this place is crawling with Rebel scum."

Sergeant Arbmbab powered up the main blaster cannon and kicked his panic bar, dropping him into the body of the tank. Around him holo screens flickered to life, providing a view of the surrounding terrain.

The comlink crackled as the calm, commanding voice of Colonel Johans came on the air. "Welcome to Spuma Flats. I trust you enjoyed the ride. The Rebel forces are at grid reference 678/446. You all know what you have to do. Good luck and good hunting."

The battalion raced across the flat, dusty plain. Ahead, heavy blaster bolts began to fill the air as the Rebel defenders opened up from their hidden positions. "Left 12 degrees, Gortz, full speed." Sergeant Arbmbab barked out his orders and spun the blaster cannon onto a now visible Rebel gun tower. Spraying the area, he watched with satisfaction as the tower erupted into searing, blue flames.

The command comlink again came to life. "Rebel airspeeders approaching in attack formation. Squad three, peel off and intercept."

As one, four huge tanks spun round and headed toward the Rebel speeders. Blaster bolts impacted on the lead tanks, causing Arbmbab's vehicle to lurch sickeningly to the left.

Clutching onto the gun's controls, Arbmbab demanded a damage report. Gortz glanced briefly at the monitor on his left and flicked a switch. "Slight damage to the port repulsortank units. Nothing I can't compensate for."

"Okay, hold us steady." Arbmbab studied the sky through his targeting computer and rapidly traversed the turret. A blip on the screen indicated the speeder was in his sights. He thumbed the firing switch and blue blaster bolts shot out from the tank to explode against the lead speeder. It lifted into the air and then hurtled toward the ground. Around it, other speeders were suffering the same fate as the rest of the squadron's guns found their marks.

The remaining two speeders attempted to fly over the tanks' positions, but were cut down by concentrated fire from the tanks' rapidly traversing turrets.

"Squad three, rejoin main attack formation. Recon 1, resume flanking patrol."

"You heard the man, Gortz. Take us in."

The repulsortanks rapidly approached the Rebels' main positions. Heavy repeat blaster fire spattered against the hull as Gortz zoomed up on the first trench. Sergeant Arbmbab fired blast after blast at the Rebel defenders. Within seconds the trench was clear. As the heavy armored vehicles crossed the trench one of the tanks erupted in flame as a laser tower scored a direct hit.

As one, the three remaining tanks of the squadron turned their weapons on the offending tower, blowing it and its crew across the dusty plain.

As the Rebels fled in disorder, armored Imperial transports brought up infantry who poured into the trenches to begin mopping up hidden Rebels.

Sergeant Arbmbab removed his helmet, wiped the sweat from his brow and opened up the comlink to base. "This is Hammer 3:2. We require a tech team up here as quickly as possible. Nothing major, but our portrepulsors need looking at." He acknowledged the response and turned to Gortz. "You can rely on Rancor. Those Rebel scum didn't even know what hit 'em. They'll be looking forward to facing stormtroopers after this!"

Death of a Rebel Base

The armored compartment swayed rhythmically from side to side as the AT-AT walker crashed through the bushes and scrub surrounding the Rebel base. Inside, the stormtroopers clutched their blaster rifles and calmly waited for the walker to reach its position. Outside, blaster fire filled the air. Occasionally, a bolt found its mark, sending echoes through the giant mechanical beast before bouncing heavily off its armored sides.

The giant walker shuddered, the rhythm of its stride momentarily broken as its huge leg crashed through a low lying building. Abandoning their medium repeating blaster, a group of Rebel defenders desperately flung themselves out of the way as the walker continued its advance. Most didn't get very far as the walker's head spat brilliant orange and yellow death onto them.

From the cockpit of the Imperial walker, Commander Hayvlin surveyed the fleeing Rebels and thumbed open the comlink. "Commence ground assault."

Slowly the walker came to a halt, its head turning from side to side as it continued to fire at the Rebel troops. With a grating of gears, it lurched slightly as its legs bent, lowering its huge body onto the ground. Its rear hatch shot open and a ramp sped down to the ground.

Armored feet clattered against the metal ramp as stormtroopers rushed out of the walker.

Rebel blaster fire lifted the first three stormtroopers into the air and flung them against the sides of the walker. But it did nothing to slow the stormtroopers behind them. They charged down the ramp, their blaster fire scattering the Rebels before more shots could be exchanged. One Rebel attempted to toss a grenade into the advancing armored figures. Before he could throw it, his body lay smoking on the ground.

The stormtroopers spread out. Groups moved to the front of the walker to form a perimeter with other stormtroopers dismounting from nearby walkers. Other groups moved toward the entrance to the underground base. Using destroyed blaster cannons, rocks and brush for cover, the stormtroopers advanced, driving the Rebels before them.

Before long, no Rebels remained alive above the ground. Only white and black armored figures moved next to the base's metal doors. "They've closed the blast doors. Send in a cutting team," ordered the assault commander.

Inside the base, Rebels crouched nervously in the corridor, their blasters held ready to fire. Lights

blazed over the armored doors as the stormtroopers cut their way in. A loud clang echoed through the corridor as the blast doors fell inward. Silence, and then searing beams of light sped down the corridor.

Chunks of rock and metal shot through the air as blaster bolts hit walls and machinery. Six stormtroopers were cut down as they rushed through the freshly-sliced opening. But their bodies were crushed underfoot as more stormtroopers poured into the base. They began to inexorably move down the corridor. Rebel blaster bolts found their marks, scattering stormtroopers right and left, but the Rebel defenders were not escaping unscathed.

Even though their dead were beginning to pile high in the corridors, the stormtroopers rapidly pushed the defenders back. The Rebels moved deeper into the base's tunnels, heading for their only hope of escape — a concealed hangar exit at the rear of the base.

The stormtroopers followed, spreading quickly through the base, taking no prisoners. The Empire was involved in a punitive strike, and the stormtroopers had their orders: reach the shield generator and destroy it, then form a perimeter around the area to contain Rebel troops while the Star Destroyer *Avenger* obliterates the base from the face of the planet.

A heavy repeating blaster fired down the corridor, pinning the crouching stormtroopers and buying the Rebel technicians time to maneuver the remaining airspeeders into position. The blast doors opened as the Rebels abandoned the heavy blaster and ran for the rising speeders. The first airspeeder shot out of the base, only to instantly explode. The other airspeeders were already on their way out. Unable to stop in the confines of the exit, they ran right into the combined firepower of the four AT-ATs and their stormtrooper contingents waiting outside. As the last speeder erupted into flame, the stormtroopers rushed into the base and joined with those inside.

High above the planet, the Star Destroyer *Avenger* was turning the Rebel base into slag metal. Blasts of high powered laser energy leapt from the vessel to the planet's surface. As the bombardment subsided, a gray-uniformed figure strode confidently onto *Avenger's* bridge. Captain Ferdas looked up from his instruments and acknowledged the newcomer's presence. "You have done well, Commander Hayvlin. Lord Vader will be pleased."

The Full Might of the Empire

Captain Oweg marched smartly to the head of the bridge. A few of the pit crew smirked as he went by, noticing the captain's distinctive walk. Oweg's gait meant he had good news for which he personally wished to take credit. Moff Vensell, standing at the viewport, was looking at nothing in particular. He acknowledged Oweg's crisp salute with a desultory nod, continuing to look at nothing in particular.

"We have an update from astrogation," said the captain. "Hypersignal sensor data and recalculation indicates that all ships shall emerge from hyperspace in formation. Only the strike cruiser *Shador* is anticipated to have deviated more than an arc second since we left Jerijador."

The captain waited, standing at attention. Vensell did not dismiss him. Oweg began to look uncomfortable. The pit crew looked up, aware of the silence. Oweg glanced at the pit crew. Vensell made a slow quarter turn, examining the comp centers. Oweg stiffened to full attention again as he inferred Vensell's meaning.

"Astrogation assured me that the data has less than a fourth factor expected delta," the captain called out. Vensell nodded as Oweg snapped another salute. He made another slight change in facing as the captain grate-

fully withdrew.

The pit crew, alert to the Moff's posture, began running test charges through all of the *Valiant's* weapons systems. As the gaze of the Moff meandered over parts of the bridge the crew leapt to life. The comm-pit began pre-programming fire command messages to the other ships for all of the exigencies for which they had planned. Controllers began the launch drill with the TIE pilots. Sensor crews began zero basing their instruments, fine tuning them to squelch any noise. Shield loads were tested, compared with standard energy draws on the engines. The helm worked through all of the emergency simulations with techs in the engine room. All sections reported to the staff lieutenant. When the row went green, the lieutenant looked up at the Moff.

"We are set to exit in 45. We shall proceed on the attack vectors unless you alter the plan, sir." Vensell nodded, turned and faced the helm.

"Lieutenant ..."

Pit Lieutenant Hast saluted faster than he ever had at the Academy when he heard Vensell's voice.

"Yes, sir?"

"Let us show these Rebels what we mean when we say 'the full might of the Empire'."

To The Reader

Our galaxy has been unusually gifted. The earliest efforts at extrapolating the probability of life-forms suggested that intelligent beings might be exceedingly rare, perhaps numbering only a handful of species in a galaxy. We now know the opposite to be true. In our grand and vast civilization, ranging over millions of stars, we know of *tens of thousands* of intelligent species.

In our efforts, we have learned that life is not rare. Rather, given a chance, *life will occur*. It is tenacious, aggressive — it seems to crave existence. The prevalence of life, under even the most threatening conditions, makes it hard not to see this will to live. And life is wondrous to behold in all its diversity.

What you hold in your hands now is the first volume of *The University of Sanbra Guide to Intelligent Life*. Rather than addressing academic issues, this document proposes to assist those first encountering a member of a given species. Rather than telling the patient reader idle trivia like the mean temperature of a given alien's homeworld, the document provides guidelines as to common cultural interests, goals, fears and drives. It is my

fervent hope that this document will aid travelers, merchants and others like them who come into frequent contact with new cultures. If but one reader can later tell me that this document has helped forge a bond of friendship or increased understanding, then I will consider my time well spent.

In light of the goals of this manuscript, I have been required to honestly state facts, regardless of their political implications. Rather than mindlessly reiterate the views held dear by certain factions within the Imperial bureaucracy (particularly COMPNOR's Coalition for Progress, Art Group), I have chosen to honestly discuss issues, regardless of how those passages might be viewed by Imperial officials.

Sincerely,



Tem Eliss
Sentientologist
University of Sanbra

A Salvager's Run

Kanda Farral watched through the viewscreen as the last of the Imperial warships made the jump to lightspeed. Captain Sreethyn had *The Lucky Find's* engines at full as the ship pulled away from Jerijador. Kanda absent-mindedly checked a few of the sensor banks. She glanced again when she saw indicator pulsons approximating the locations of better than a dozen ships, all on roughly the same vector as *The Lucky Find*. All were making like the last bolt from a busted blaster toward the Imperial jump point.

"Suit up woman! I didn't hire you to look at colored lights all day," growled Sreethyn, "and it looks like some of the left-goods are larger than usual. Adjust the programming on the retrieval droids."

Kanda deftly reprogrammed each of the four droids, but had more difficulty than she would have liked getting into her suit. She checked to see if Sreethyn had noticed. His forced grin and slightly shaking head said he had. Okay, now he knew for certain that she had lied about her zero-G experience. The droids were going to do most of the work, so taking care of them was more important.

"Remember to lock in before you lock out." Kanda found herself nodding, a clumsy motion inside of a work suit, in response to the thin-sounding voice over her comlink. She stepped into the airlock, making sure the frequency of the T-beam actuator and her tractor beacons were the same. She then by-the-booked the depressurization sequence, and vacced with the droids. Kanda was pleased to see the droids scan and maneuver immediately in an optimum search pattern. She began inspecting the refuse from the Imperial fleet.

"There is a Treson cluster, a third full, of KDY

Servo Circuit surfaces, OP configuration ... they just jettisoned them!"

"That's the kind of stuff we're after Farral." Sreethyn's voice carried excitement over her comlink. Kanda began to tag containers and activate the beacons. Immediately the containers lurched toward the hull of *The Lucky Find*.

"Why would they just throw the good out with the bad?" Kanda asked as she slowburst to avoid a compacted piece of trash.

"Because they're the Empire. They got more money than ships, see? So when it comes to allocating cargo space before a jump, they fill themselves to the gunnels. If they rush they just replace half-empty containers with full ones."

"But you can't sell a lot of this stuff on the market, Sreethyn. It's illegal tech ..." Kanda stopped herself, realizing that Sreethyn could very well sell that sort of hardware as long as no one knew about it. And Sreethyn was inside the ship, Kanda outside. Sreethyn's laugh was unreadable through the comlink.

"I'm no smuggler, Farral. I'm a licensed salvager. I pick the stuff up, sell what's legal on the open market, and sell the rest back to the Navy."

"The Navy buys back its garbage?"

"If I package all the partials into standard units they do. They pay full price. I like to think of it as getting some of my taxes back."

Kanda tagged another container. She laughed as she watched two of the droids struggle with a WD condenser pod, as the entire unit and the droids slowly tumbled toward *The Lucky Find*. This was absurd, but it paid well. She could come to like this.

The Promotion of Lieutenant Veers

Veers studied General Irrv's command team through macrobinoculars. From high atop the shuttle docking platform, he had a decent view of the ceremony. He hadn't really expected to be invited; he wasn't a senior member of the command team. No, Veers was just a junior lieutenant, commanding a single AT-AT. Naturally, his opinion hadn't counted much at the staff meeting when he objected to the whole idea of the ceremony. The General, who dreamed it up, had slapped Veers with a demerit and confined him to base "for the duration" — whatever that meant.

He gazed down at his walker, which stood at its dock below the shuttle deck. The garrison's other two AT-ATs were miles away on patrol. Veers's pilot and gunner were sharing his punishment, keeping busy by running diagnostic checks on the vehicle with help from a couple of B-3Z technical Droids. He glanced at them, then turned back to the spectacle about to start less than 10 kilometers away.

The powered lenses magnified the scene, making Veers feel as though he were there. There was General Irrv and his chief officers in Imperial dress uniforms, looking smug and confident. Beside them were a legion of stormtroopers carrying ceremonial weapons that were more for show than combat. Shifting the scope to the right, Veers zoomed in on the other participants. He studied the grim determination on the face of Kloff, ruler of the people of the planet Culroon III. With him were a dozen warriors, also in ceremonial dress. Unlike the General, Kloff had not brought the bulk of his fighting force with him for this meeting. That worried Veers.

Click, zoom in

That idiot, Irrv, didn't look worried at all.

Veers had arrived with the first research team to Culroon III, to provide protection while the Imperial garrison was built. He had learned a lot in the short time he was with the researchers. He knew one thing: the ceremony to which Kloff had agreed was unprecedented in the history of Culroon. The Culroon would never submit willingly to Imperial subjugation with a simple exchange of sacrificial weapons. It just wasn't in their makeup.

"We might attain this planet with a show of force and by spilling a little Culroon blood," Veers had offered, "but not with a hollow ceremony." Unfortunately, the ceremony was the General's proposal . . .

"Nonsense, Lieutenant!" Irrv exploded. "Your Academy training has made you a tad bloodthirsty, that's all. One more word Veers," the General warned, "and I'll have you riding a dewback on Tatooine!" Lieutenants don't win arguments with generals.

Clamping down on the memory, Veers scanned the crowd for some hint of Kloff's plan — there must be one. The Culroon were simple people, with a simple culture, shaped by a history of amazing violence and destruction. Due to an endless series of wars, Culroon never achieved the technology to join the rest of the galaxy. Space travel was beyond their capabilities. But that didn't stop trade, and energy weapons were even-

tually introduced to the planet. It was these weapons that gave Kloff the power to unite the planet and end its wars.

The Old Republic had known of Culroon III, but had left it to its own devices. The Emperor would have none of that. He had ordered General Irrv to subjugate the world however he saw fit. The problem, thought Veers, is that Irrv is a fool.

The ceremony began, and Veers directed his attention through the macrobinoculars. He watched as Kloff accepted a Naval sword from Irrv and calmly sheathed it in the General's aide, Colonel Jeffers. In the next instant, Veers' suspicions were confirmed. From hiding places that formed a circle around the Imperials, thousands of Culroon warriors appeared, wielding power weapons. Veers dropped the macrobinoculars and started barking orders. It was going to take a miracle and time to save the command team and stormtrooper unit. Veers didn't have much hope of either. But he had his walker.

Veers and his crew ran through their prep sequence. Engines came up; lights indicated all systems functional. Then, knowing it was a court-martial offense, Veers gave the command to move out; the AT-AT began to walk, gaining speed as it went.

At the ceremony, Irrv ordered the stormtroopers to form a protective ring around him. His soldiers fought well, but dress weapons were no match for Culroon blasters. Kloff and his warriors used sheer numbers to wear down the valiant stormtroopers. The protective ring got smaller and smaller as more Imperials fell. Kloff shouted for his men to press the attack, but . . .

The ground began to tremble. Kloff gaped at the horizon; a huge metallic monster loomed over the tree tops. The beast looked hungry, turning its terrible head from side to side, as if in search of prey. It moved fast, each massive stride brought it closer and closer, crashing through trees and flattening brush as it came to help its Imperial masters.

Many Culroon warriors panicked and ran. They had no wish to die under massive hooves, or serve as a meal for a metal horror. Skillfully, Veers directed wide blasts from the weapon batteries, sweeping the area around the Imperials. Grath, the stormtrooper commander, rallied his soldiers and ordered them to fight their way to the AT-AT, seeking refuge beneath its giant legs.

But it wasn't necessary. Seeing their blaster fire bounce off the machine's metal hide, the surviving Culroon warriors broke and routed. Veers ordered his gunner to fire at will, picking off Culroon as they ran.

Veers smiled down at Irrv from his viewport. "General," he said, "I do believe you owe me an apology."

Irrv visibly reddened. "What I owe you, Lieutenant Veers, is a court-martial for disobeying my direct . . ." He never finished his sentence.

As Irrv's body dropped, Commander Grath holstered his blaster. "Major Veers, you'll be good enough to escort us back to the garrison?"

Major Veers? He liked the sound of that. Veers smiled again. "Of course, sir. But would you prefer to ride?"



SoroSuub Corporation Proclamation Number 137d

Fellow Sullustans. As of this 62nd day of the 8,494th Sullust Year, let it be known that for the greater good of our Sullust, the Sullustan Council has been disbanded for the foreseeable future. To fill the gap this necessary action has created, the Board of Directors of SoroSuub shall serve as supreme planetary authority until the crisis has passed. We know that everyone will band together under our corporate logo to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Further, SoroSuub fully supports the policies of Emperor Palpatine as outlined in his most recent address to the Imperial Senate.

Unfortunately, there are agencies at work on our world that object to the Empire's policies and dreams for our future. This has caused a crisis that, if left unchecked, threatens to destroy our planet. We at SoroSuub are dedicated to harmony on Sullust and are committed to promoting peace throughout the galaxy.

We are further aware of rumors concerning an outlaw band, calling itself the Rebel Alliance, that is spreading vicious and dangerous lies about the Emperor. These criminals are malcontents, seeking to undermine the beneficial work of a truly great being. Anyone with information leading to the identification and capture of "Rebel" supporters will be greatly rewarded.

Be advised, these criminals are unpredictable and dangerous. Mandatory protective curfews will be in effect until the danger has passed.

This is a day of celebration. Together with our friend the Emperor, Sullust will march into the prosperous new galaxy the Imperials envision. Join with us, and enter a better tomorrow.

Siin Suub, Chairman
SoroSuub Corporation

Thoughts on Rebellion

Excerpt from a tract by Alendar Jarvis

Chaos and weakness must be avoided at all costs, or we will find ourselves once again in the dark final days of the Old Republic, when the leaders were indecisive and feeble. The Empire is the natural evolution of human culture. The "feel-good, we're-just-one-big-happy-family" philosophy of the Old Republic led to corruption and rot. It all sounds so loving and wonderful in the Rebel propaganda broadcasts, but educated people know it just doesn't work. It took centuries to prove, but we now know that it absolutely does not work.

The Rebels are dangerous because they defy authority, and encourage us to turn back the clock and adopt a dead-end philosophy that has already proven itself unworkable.

To be sure, some of the misguided fools may have good intentions, but they are the most dangerous fanatics of the lot, even more so than the Justice Action Network terrorists. For the sake of the Empire and its citizens, they must be convinced to lay aside their senseless Rebellion or be destroyed.

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(starwars.com)
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